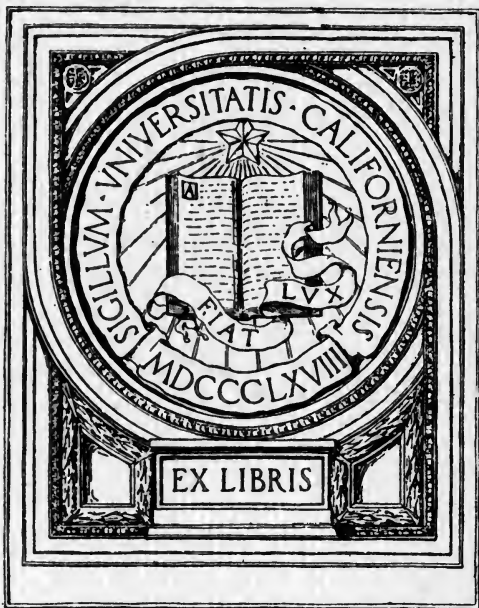




IN THE SHADOW
OF GOD
GUY ARTHUR JAMIESON

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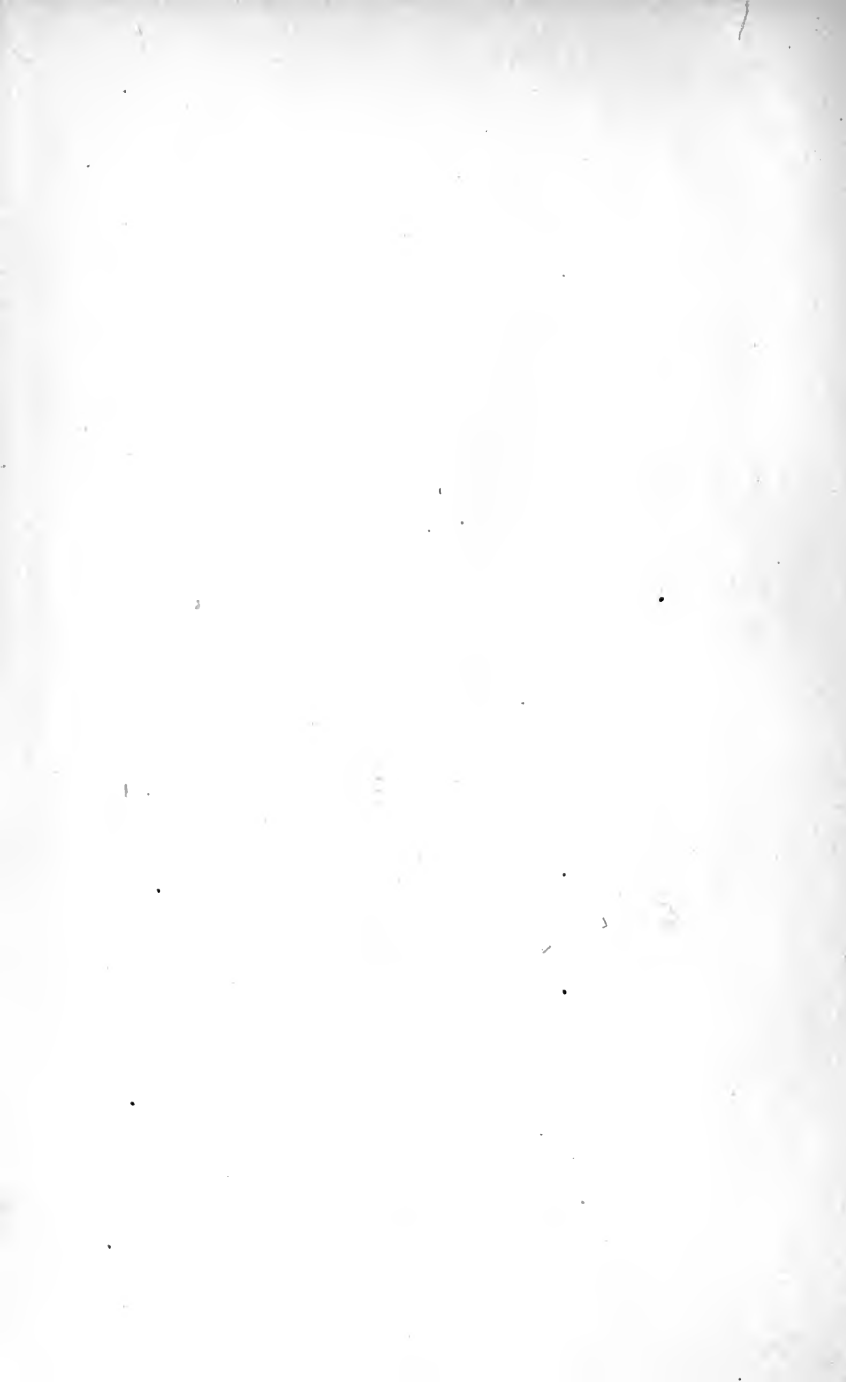


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IN THE SHADOW OF GOD.

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IN THE SHADOW OF GOD

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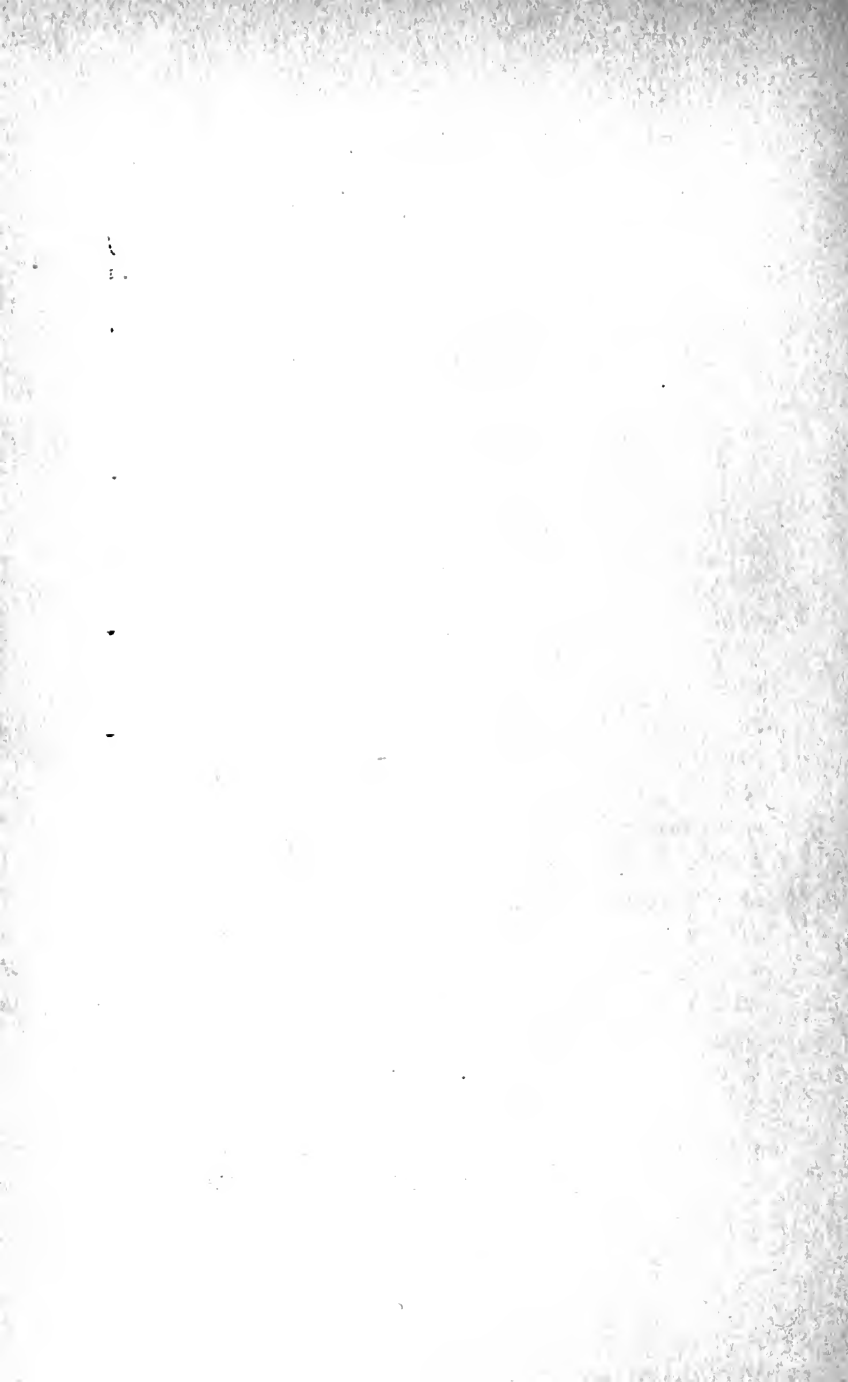
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In the Shadow of God

To
ALFRED L. CLARK.

304036



IN THE SHADOW OF GOD.

CHAPTER I.

Over the face of Devil's Backbone hung a low, far-reaching blanket of dun clouds, making prematurely somber the close of the October day. One suddenly set down here at this hour might easily imagine he had come to the top of the world. The narrow neck of land rose sheer from encompassing shadows; no sign of life or habitation met the eye. The skyline melted vaguely into the lower obscurity, save in the west, where still lingered a brown smudge of tenuous vapor. On the highway that wound along the Backbone appeared a moving silhouette that grew slowly into the figure of a man. He stopped and peered about him into the night. On the end of a staff thrown across his shoulder depended a handbag, and in his hand he carried a square, bulky package. This he placed upon the ground and sank with a motion of weariness upon it. There was a dejection on the face of the youth in keeping with the gloom around him. The toilsome ascent of the hill would

account for the weariness, but the dejection was out of place on the face of one so young. The cause: He was drinking the first bitter draught from the cup of failure. Thus early in his career he was confronted with the question of his worth. The one thing that he had felt that he could do, that his soul cried out to him to do, he had been told was hopeless. It was rebellion at this ultimatum that embittered his soul. His ambition refused to accept its incapacity. He would not acknowledge his disillusionment. For a moment he was oblivious of his environment; he might have been a thousand miles away, for all the impression it made on his brain. Then his jaws shut to with a snap, his clenched hand came down on the bundle with a sharp clack.

"I will, I will," he cried, determinedly, to the night.

There was a quick intake of breath and the youth stood erect, an air of defiance, undaunted strength, in the poise of his head as he faced the solitude. The mood of depression had fallen from him. He became keenly alive to the magic of the nocturnal scene. The moon slipped above the horizon and a mystical transformation touched land and sky. The convolutions of the slow moving clouds glowed with a soft luminousness; films of vague light etched fantastic shapes, weird outlines on the inky shadows. From the depths of the valley the tree tops rose up ranks of

crouching soldiers; the plain stretched a limitless, mist-shrouded sea.

As he stood here alone, his head among the clouds, his shadow falling into the abyss at his feet, and gazed at the colossal, mystery-touched spaces, he was lifted up out of himself—his imagination glowed, his soul thrilled within him.

"If I could only put it on canvas," he muttered earnestly.

He lifted the bag to his shoulder and resumed the journey.

Some six months before Marvin Garner had gone to New York to study art. For two years he had hoarded his money, earned teaching country schools, looking forward to this event. During the time he had studied and painted, confident that with a few months of instruction in the city he would be able to make his way. He saw and felt so keenly the strange, wild beauty of the untouched Texas world in which he lived that he did not doubt for a moment that in time he would come adequately to express it in colors. Like all artists he was endowed with a passion to create, and his soul was eager for tangible expression. He wanted to give the world what he alone could give. His egotism lay in the belief that he had something to give; his reward would be in the world's acceptance of it.

He had corresponded with officers of the school

before his departure and had been encouraged and urged to come on. But three months in the metropolis saw the end of his resources; then he turned to his teachers for advice, hoping some way might be found for him to earn his keep while he continued his studies. They questioned him, looked over his work,—a few figures, drawings from models and still life,—shook their heads and advised him to return to the West and teaching. Where there was unusual talent help sometimes was forthcoming, but his case was not promising. With warm regrets and a cold touch of the hand he was dismissed.

Mechanically he found his way to the street, stood in the din and bustle, stunned. Never before had it occurred to him to question his powers. Always it had been only a matter of time and work. To hear himself pronounced incompetent, to be weighed in the balance and found wanting, to have the divine spark he had cherished pale into an *ignis fatuus*, froze, momentarily, all the springs of his life.

While his mother had not sought to persuade him from the artistic venture, he knew that she thought it unwise. But his father had tried every means to turn him from his purpose. "A wild goose chase" had been the words used in referring to his visit to the city. That his parents had been justified in their disapproval added poignancy to his defeat. His pride rebelled at the thought of writing home for

money with which to return, so he had been forced to tramp the streets for days looking for work. At length he found a position in a factory, where for weeks he stood ten hours a day at a wheel and wound wire into bed springs. But when the necessary funds had been realized, though at the expense of great bodily suffering, his pride was intact.

Now as he swung along the Backbone he recalled the incidents of his brief, ill-starred career in the city. While realizing that an end had been put to his hopes, at least for some years, he still rejoiced that he had made the venture. It had been worth while—worth the price of his humiliation. He had had a glimpse of the world—the great world of which he had dreamed, and life could never be the same to him again. He had seen the works of the great masters and now had a standard by which to measure his own efforts. Having recovered from the passing mortification of the return, his spirits began to grow bouyant. He still believed in the goodwill of fate. Then he did a strange thing. He took from his pocket a square bit of lace, lifted it above his eyes, where it fluttered a moment, a strange night moth, pressed it gently to his lips and returned it to his bosom. Again he became oblivious of the night and the solitude.

There broke upon the quiet the rumble of a slow-moving wagon. Marvin turned and glanced along

the way he had just traversed. A cotton wagon lurched into view on the brow of the divide. Then there floated on the air the words of the old song he had heard his father sing so often at family prayer:

“How firm a foundation ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in His excellent word.”

As the words echoed and re-echoed in the depths of the valley, he found himself revising the last two into “wonderful world.” Why should man go to books for his faith, with the great world of sky and earth hugging him to its bosom? If one would only open his eyes; only listen? What a wonderful God to have made it all. Something out of the grey immensity seemed to move, to touch him. He felt as if in the presence of a sentient thing—this vague, mysterious, shadowy expanse. If he could only catch the subtle, evasive spirit that pervaded it, that stirred the imagination, quickened the pulses, proclaimed the God behind and in it all. Faith is easy to youth and immaturity, though often but a pagan, pantheistic faith. But Marvin, looking back to that night across the gulf of years, would have fain clothed himself again in that faith, that immaturity, but failed. There are some journeys the soul may take that cannot be retraced.

“Hello,” said the man, friendlily from the wagon, as he overtook the pedestrian. “Would you like a lift?”

"Thank you," returned Marvin, making a place for his bundles and climbing over the wheel to the side of the stranger.

"Which way are you travelling?"

"Toward Diamond," answered Marvin, eyeing the great, angular, bearded Samson.

"You're in luck. I live two miles the other side, but I stop there to unload some freight I've got fer Garner."

"He's my father."

"You don't say?" He turned and looked the other over. "Well, that's a new one on me. Always heard he didn't have but one son?"

"He hasn't."

"You ain't that picher son of his, now, air you?"

A smile came onto Marvin's face that banished the last trace of his unhappy mood.

"I guess hungry son would be more truthful."

The man hesitated, then fished a lunch-box from beneath the seat.

"No, thank you," said Marvin, anticipating him; "I'll soon be home now, and I'll not trouble you."

The driver pushed back the box. "I guess you're wise to do so, though you might 'a' found a bite to stay yer stomach. Herd you'd gone to Noo York to make pichers?"

"I did. I'm returning."

"How'd you find the bizness?"

"Flourishing."

"You like it?"

"It is great."

"Now, ain't it curious though how you find one feller wanting to do this an' the other feller that? I take it it's a way Providence has a-leadin' men, keepin' 'em, as it were, from trespassin' on each other an' crowdin' the persuits. Though it do seem as all the youngsters in our parts feel called to turn 'em-selves into lawyers an' doctors — Providence er no providence; an' some of them ain't no more fittin' 'n me. I tell 'em they've jest got a call to git outen the sun." He threw back his head and laughed, his turft of beard projecting a luminous brush into the moonlight. "Curious though the different talents Providence gives folks. But it's jest in keepin' with the rest of his workin's—he works it 'bout right. See how he moves in the hearts of men—an' wimin fer that matter—makin' one fall in love here an' ernother there. It's a wise foresight er, as the feller said, 'everybody might want my wife,' then the devil 'ud be to pay."

He slashed the reins across the backs of the horses and guffawed. The thought came to Marvin that even Providence was not always successful in steering men clear of entanglements along that line, but he remained silent.

"They say, you air no common kind of a picher

taker — make 'em with yer own hands — trees an' rocks an' the sky an' prairie? Now curious, ain't it? But if Providence gives you a talent to make them kinds of pichers, why, I guess he meant fer you to make 'em." He hesitated a space, then continued haltingly, as if he were not sure of the propriety of his confidences. "If the Lord's bestowed one of his talents on me, an' I ain't shore he has, it would be to preach"——

"To preach?"

The other detected the note of surprise in Marvin's voice, and hastened to add, "None yer circuit-riders er station preachers er elders; jest a licensed exhorter. I may have the talent an' then I mayn't. If I have I wouldn't like to keep it wrapped in a napkin, as the Scripchers says."

"Have you made an effort to develop your talent?"

"Well, yes, I reckon so. Talk in prayer-meetin' an' love-feasts, exhort the mourners — with demonstration of the spirit, if I do say it—but I've tried fer license twice an' failed."

"Try again," said Marvin, encouragingly. He felt a sudden sympathy going out to this crude, ignorant man who sought to realize the longing of his soul. They were brothers in misfortune.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Oliver—Will Oliver."

"Well, I have enjoyed the ride, Mr. Oliver. Our

ambitions are not so different, after all. You want to tell about a God you get from a book, I want to paint a God I find in Nature. If you decide to try for license again I'll be glad to help you."

"Oh, I'm tryin' agin—can't keep my candle hid under a bushel, an' I'll 'preciate yer help."

The Backbone dipped toward the valley and the lights of the village blinked timidly through the moonlight. Marvin clambered from the wagon, asking that his luggage be left at the store. It occurred to him as a good way to prepare his parents for his unannounced return.

The vehicle rattled on, and he swung down the road in a long easy stride. The ride had rested him, and somehow the companionship revived his spirits like a tonic. The road made a detour and brought to view a square of uncultivated ground. It was called here a graveyard, and the headstones glistened white in a tangle of decaying vegetation. He stopped and gazed into the enclosure. He was studying the play of light and shadow that here made an exquisite etching in black and white. The significance of the ghostly slabs did not penetrate just yet to his intelligence. He threw open the gate and entered. As he sat on a broken stone his thoughts drifted futureward. In that direction the outlook was confused, perplexing. The avenues of endeavor were limited; there was but one thing unalterably fixed—somehow

he would find time to paint. He wondered vaguely what the hidden years held in store for him, but the wildest flight of his imagination brought back no intuitions of the time when he would rest again upon this same spot, a man ten years older, who instead of seeking vainly to look beyond to-day's horizon, would kneel at a newly carved monument and shed futile tears as in regret he retraced the years.

CHAPTER II.

When Marvin turned where the road, now a wire-fenced lane, widened into the one street of Diamond, a lone beacon flickered into the night. The tread of his feet sounded preternaturally. With the roar of Broadway still in his ears, the quiet became almost audible. How good to see the sky-line, to watch the moon riding the heavens. For a moment he was almost glad he was home again.

Presently his eyes rested on two motionless figures in the shadow of a porch; then there was a quick movement, a sharp clack as a gate swung open—the next moment his mother clung to his neck, kissed his cheeks, a-tremble with joy.

“Son, what a glad surprise you gave us.”

If there was a rival that could deflect Marvin from art it now rested on his bosom. His love for his mother was a passion. She led him to the door where his father stood waiting. Mr. Garner gave his son a hearty greeting, and, stooping, brushed his cheek with his bearded lips, a formality he had clung to, though otherwise undemonstrative toward his son.

When Marvin followed his parents into the house,

Aunt Molly, a derelict of a past order of things, greeted him with a motherly hug.

"Bress yeh soul, honey, et do my eyes good to see you ehgin. You ain't change a bit."

Supper had been prepared and Aunt Molly hastened to put it before him. Then feigning some errand to the kitchen, retired, leaving him alone with his mother.

There was a momentary silence. Mrs. Garner's intuitions, unerring where her son was concerned, had already divined the reason of his return. And while rejoicing in her soul at what she interpreted as its prophetic significance, with rare delicacy refrained from any word or question that might reveal to him that she knew. With motherly tact she soon had him at his ease, and, forgetting himself, he plunged with her into the whirl of the great metropolis; bringing to her imagination vivid pictures of its streets, crash of traffic, skyscrapers, ship-laden rivers, and most vividly of all the wonderful galleries where hung the works of the masters. But there was a touch of regret in his voice as he closed the glowing recital.

"But I had to give it up."

"Son, perhaps it will be for the best."

With his mother everything was for the best. Often he had been irritated at her unreasoning optimism, but now he answered cheerfully.

"Well, I should hope so."

When his mother left him alone the door to the kitchen was slowly opened and a colored head protruded dubiously.

"Come in, Aunt Molly."

"Whar's yo' ma?"

"Gone up to see about my room."

Aunt Molly heaved a sigh and rolled her eyes in a way that indicated great disturbance of mind.

"What is it, Aunt Molly?" said Marvin, encouragingly.

"Mistah Marvin, you sho' has a great raysponsible-ness—you sho' has." She paused to note the effect of her words.

"How's that, Aunt Molly?"

"No, sah, wouldn't hab no sech raysponsibleness on dese shoulders," and she gave those expansive knobs of fat a deprecating shrug.

Marvin refused to gratify her by further show of curiosity.

"I refuhs to that anjil mother ob yo'n—you don't half suspicion dat mother you got."

"But not an angel for a long time, I hope."

"Yes, sah, I knows what you mean, but I'z done an' recluded dat you don' hab to die foah you's an anjil—not yo' mother. Ef you done ain' anjils yere howsomedever you goin' to be anjils in the New Jerusalem? No, sah, you jes' go on bein' what you

wah ober yere, er yer somebody else. Yes, sah, you jes' gits yer wings an' robes of white ober dar. How-somedever hadn't been you done come back yo' mother done be gittin' ready fah de wings an' white rayment. Yes, sah, been griebin' herself to deth while you in de great city——"

"Why, Aunty, she never said a word against my going."

"No, sah, no she ain't; no, sah, dat ain't her way—go makin' trouble an' forcin' her will, but I knows. Yes, sah, she's furd far you in de city. Don' tell me I ain't done seed her griebin' an' griebin'. Ain't I done come on her, time ner gin', when she think nobody roun', cryin' an' prayin'? Yes, sah, prayin' fah you, an' beggin' de Lord to keep you from de wicked way ob de city an' bring you back speedly. Yes, sah, dat's what she say—speedly, an' her prayer done been answered, an' you done come."

"But, Aunty, you know I was coming back?"

"Yes, I know, sometime, maybe so, sometime, but yo' mother say speedly, an' yere you is. The Lord's 'quainted wid dat mother ob yo'n. She jes' talk to him like he right dar, an' he done hear her. Yes, sah, if you don' love an' cherish dat mother ob yo'n de Lord goin' to sen' some great calamty, he sho' is. Now, I's done said it," she broke off abruptly, as she turned to the dishes, with the air of having got well rid of an unpleasant duty.

Marvin's room was a little nest up near the roof, and when he entered it he found it just as he had left it five months before. His palette, whittled out of a white pine board, his easel and brushes encrusted with paint, had remained untouched; but the crude pictures his mother had decorated with mat and cardboard frames and hung on the wall. A Bible had been placed conspicuously on the table, replacing the one his mother had slipped into his grip. His window opened onto the valley, and he looked out into the glory of the moonlight. He felt a sudden depression as if some unseen force was seeking to influence him against his will. The words of Aunt Molly had stuck in his ears. "Yes, speedily, that's what she said." Could a mother's prayers cripple a son's ambition? Was it possible God had anything to do with his failure? Did he concern himself in the affairs of unknown, struggling youths? He had never thought of the matter in this light before. While religion had never made any special appeal to him he had unquestioningly accepted what he had been taught. But this new phase of it caused him to wonder, to think. Was man after all a mere puppet in the hands of the All-Powerful? Could the God who had seemed to speak to him on Devil's Backbone exult in compassing his humiliation? Would he have to take him into partnership if he succeeded in art? Suppose his prayers should clash with his

mother's? He became confused. He would try to think it out sometime. A great drowsiness overcame him and he fell asleep, the rasping voice of Will Oliver dinning in his ears, "No, I ain't goin' to bury my talent."

CHAPTER III.

The following morning Marvin sat by the open window gazing down the valley that yawned at his feet. Across the black farmland workmen plodded slowly, turning up endless glistening furrows to the sun. Beyond, Devil's Backbone lifted its bald head against the cold sky. As he looked he fell to questioning—why was he so out of harmony with the life around him? from whence came the dominating instinct that obsessed him? But he must go to work. The world must see the great Texas he loved through his eyes. There would be years of labor, perhaps disappointments—but then! Some day he would be hailed as the new Corot, the untaught Millet of the West. He was impatient to begin. But there was a restraining hand on his arm, the pressure of which was to dispel his dreams and fill his life with tragedy. His mother's arms slipped about his neck, her lips were warm against his cheek.

"Why, son, you are most a man. I—I can feel it."

"Yes, I must shave."

He turned and kissed her. How he loved this timid mother of his. How proud she would be when

he had proven his powers. If he could lead her through the Metropolitan, let her see what it meant to be an artist? Perhaps he would some day. He pulled her onto his knee, and holding her in his strong arms motioned toward the valley.

"Look down there, ma," he said. "Some day I'll have it all on canvas."

A look of fear came into her eyes. She became suddenly sober, distressed. Then she said falteringly:

"Son, don't you think it is more beautiful just as it is?" She struggled from him and sank into a rocker at his side.

"You mean unpainted?"

"Yes," she said, gazing to where the shadow of a cloud flitted like a sinister ghost across the radiance of the fields.

"But, ma, none but blind eyes see it," he insisted. "Think of it—there are hundreds who would gladly give thousands of dollars for the landscape from this window. But it is not just what you see that I'd catch, but what it suggests—the mysterious something that fills the imagination with thoughts—thoughts of the wonderful God that moves in it all. I can't express it—if you don't understand already I can't make you understand," he said hopelessly.

"Son, I think I do understand, a little." The uneasiness had gone from her eyes; a glad light kindled

in their depths. "I think I know how you feel. Nature often moves me in that way. But, son, God in Nature is cold, illusive, impersonal. It is not in hill and sky that He speaks plainest to the soul. His nature, His attitude toward man, is revealed only in His Son. If you would look to him with the same eagerness, openness of mind, that you bestow upon the works of His hand, He'd come into your heart, so fill it with love for Him that you'd long to cry it out to the world. How much more noble to tell of His mercy, goodness, forgiveness, love, to poor, lost, sinful men than to paint the most beautiful pictures?"

She paused, her eyes searchingly on his face. But he made no response. The full import of her words had not yet dawned upon him. Somehow he always felt embarrassed when his mother spoke to him in this intimate way of religion.

"I've thought, son, forgive me for speaking plainly, perhaps I ought to have spoken sooner, that this impulse you seem to have toward art is a mistaken one. What you feel and do not understand is the Holy Spirit leading you toward a higher calling."

Marvin understood now. The revelation came like a shock. His imagination caught up the idea, turned it about and viewed it in a dozen different lights.

Already he saw himself grotesque, bizarre, in the role of preacher—the thought was repulsive.

“Ma, it isn’t possible—you can’t mean that I ought to preach?”

“Yes, son, I feel as sure of it as I do that you are here by my side and not in the faraway wicked city.”

“But, ma, ought we not to do what we love to do?—what Nature seems to have meant for us to do?”

“Yes, son, that sounds plausible. But if we should always do the things we love to do where would it lead us? The higher duties of life call for some sacrifice. Where would fallen man be to-day if Christ had thought only of His own comfort, had not given himself, even unto death, for us? We must take up our cross.”

She moved her chair nearer and let her head rest on his arm.

“Son, I am going to tell you why I am sure you ought to preach, and why I have never spoken to you before. When you were a babe, just beginning to toddle about, a session of the annual conference was held in the town where we lived. Bishop Marvin, for whom you are named, presided. Your father and I had the honor to entertain him. When he arrived you had been sick some days. You rapidly grew worse, and all hope of your recovery had been despaired of. We watched over you day and night

expecting the end at any moment. One morning at the close of prayers, the Bishop asked if he might see you. We led him to where you lay, feebly gasping for breath, your life flickering out. The Bishop stood a moment looking down at you silently, then he took you in his arms and, lifting his fine thoughtful eyes as if looking into the very face of God, prayed for your life. Listen, son, these are his words; they have never ceased to echo in my ears and make music in my heart: 'Father, spare the life of this babe, and, if it is thy will, call him into thy holy ministry.' From that hour you began to recover, and before the conference was ended you were being tossed in the Bishop's arms and toddled at his heels. Son, it seemed like a miracle, and I've felt that the Lord meant you to be a preacher. We have never mentioned the incident for we did not wish to influence your mind till you were old enough to think for yourself. But all these years your father and I have not let a day pass that we did not add our prayers to that of the Bishop. I did not oppose your going to New York for I felt that it might in some way help you to a decision in the choice of your life-work. When you returned so unexpectedly I hoped that you might have given up art, and thought it time for you to know what has been so long in our minds."

Marvin's chin had dropped to his hands. He still

stared fixedly into the sunlit spaces. His mother rose and stood a moment uncertainly. "Son, forgive me if—if you think I should have spoken sooner." She bent and kissed him, and, turning, glided softly away.

Marvin still thought upon his mother's revelation and sought to face the new problem, when his father's broad shoulders and great head of hair crossed his line of vision. He had scarcely moved since his mother left him an hour ago. Mr. Garner stopped in the door hesitatingly, regarding his son. He seemed to divine what had transpired. Marvin looked up constrainedly, but turned again quickly to the window. His father moved across the room to an opposite one. Far beyond a stretch of sombre fields and woods the brown prairie swelled onto the sky. He fell to watching some cattle as they came single file over the divide—their horns protruding at first mysteriously, then the outline slowly growing till the animal stood a black silhouette—to quickly pass from sight. Though thinking of his son, searching for words to express that which he wished to say, the thought intruded on his mind—how like it was to life. We emerge out of darkness, stand for a moment fullgrown in the light, then pass into the "valley of the shadow." He turned with sudden resolve, walked to his son and threw himself into the chair his wife had lately vacated.

"Marvin, your mother has spoken to you?"

"Yes."

"Don't act hastily, son. Take plenty of time to think it over. I wouldn't like to see you make a mistake that might spoil your life. Life at best is so very short, so unsatisfactory, that we should seek to make the most of it. In making a choice of a career we should keep in view what will be best for us and others in the long run, in the end."

There was a silence. Then Mr. Garner rose haltingly and walked back and forth the room; stood a space looking down on the drooping figure, then turned slowly and left his son alone with his thoughts.

CHAPTER IV.

At the edge of a little farm, two miles across the valley from Diamond, late one afternoon a shirt-sleeved man worked havoc among the trees, the sound of his ax ringing sharply on the air. His sleeves were rolled back above his elbows, and as he lifted his arm for the telling stroke the muscles bunched into quivering knobs; his shock of yellow hair flared in the wind. He was tall, straight of spine, the outline of his erect figure, from the point of his shoulders to his feet, forming a great letter V. His sun-tanned features were coarse like the lineaments of a stone statute; his movements suggested a large, well-built, healthy animal. As he toiled, a pungent odor exuded from his person into the air. He lopped the branches from the felled tree and gathered them into conical-shaped heaps. A number of these already dotted the open between the trees—pigmy huts, soon to become lurking places for night prowlers, isles of refuge for the sorely pressed cottontail. Alongside these were oblong stacks of cordwood, the red hearts of the split oak giving a touch of color to the predominating duns and browns.

Occasionally the woodman paused, leaning on the

handle of his ax as he measured with calculating eye the cords of wood. During one of these rests he turned toward the west to ascertain the time of day, his hand stretched out toward the horizon that showed beneath the sun. As he drew it back he saw a footman approaching from the direction of the village. He stood a moment regarding him, then with an air of recognition, he hastily put on his hat and coat and advanced to meet him.

"Well, if it ain't Mr. Marvin," he exclaimed in a loud bass, a broad grin gashing his face. He was evidently pleased at the unexpected visit.

"I hope you ain't come up yere to make my picher," he said crushing the extended hand.

"No, not to paint you ; I want to talk to you. Let us sit down."

They returned to the fallen log into which Oliver had just sunk his ax to the helve. The odor of bruised twigs, mold, new earth, and freshly cut wood was in the air. Marvin's eyes wandered to the cabin and he took in in a half-seeing way the activities of small life going on there. Towheaded children ran in and out the door, gazing curiously toward the men in the woods. Occasionally a form darkened the window, and in a quavering treble the words, "Come to the fountain filled with blood," floated out on the evening. A pagan wail of superstition that still vitally echoed down the closing years of the nine-

teenth century, and would continue to echo — how long?

"I want to know just how you felt, Mr. Oliver, when you first thought you ought to preach?" Marvin began.

Oliver felt complimented. "Jest call me Bill; I ain't never got used to nothin' else—less'n it's Brother Will," he said meekly enough, but beginning to swell with self-importance at finding himself an object of interest. He took a damp plug of tobacco from his hip-pocket and offered it to his visitor. But being refused he liberally filled his own mouth. He was not going to enter upon the recital of so important a subject as his spiritual experiences without proper nourishment.

"Well, Brother Marvin, it was an awful feelin'. For a long time I didn't know what was the matter. I seemed to lose interest in everything; felt like something turrible was goin' to happen, and had bad dreams nights. It went on that way fer months, then one Sunday, while I was listening to Parson Hardy, it flashed over me I'z called to preach, an' the feelin' I had was jest the movin' of the Spirit. I spoke to the parson an' he said it might be I had jest been neglectin' my duty; that if I had a call there wouldn't be no gettin' away from it. Well, I took up my duty, but I didn't git no better, but I kept procrastinatin', thinkin' shorely the Lord wouldn't

call an ignorant feller like me—I didn't feel fittin' to preach. Then 'bout that time I met Mary an' fell in love. After that the carnal man got the upper hand of me, an' I didn't think of nothin' but Mary till we got married. Then the Spirit seemed to leave me. I got so at ease in Zion I couldn't 'a' felt miserable if I had tried. Well, Tom come, an' the nex' year Lulu, an' my min' was so taken up with worldly things I fergot all 'bout religin an' the call. Why, fer two year me an' Mary never went to a camp-meetin'. Then there come 'long one fall the 'vangelist Clark from Dallas an' begin a revival over on Brushy. The neighborhood went wild over him. Me an' Mary drove over one night, more outen curiosity then fer any spiritual good. It was a wonderful meetin'. The Spirit got hol' of me agin, an' 'fore I knowed what I was doin' I'z standin' among the mourners shoutin' an' exhortin'. Then I felt shore I had the call. As I tol' you on Backbone t'other night I've tried twice fer license an' failed. Maybe the Lord's jest puttin' obstacles in the way to try my faith; but I'm studyin' an' I'm goin' to try agin."

He paused to note the effect of his experiences. The sun was setting red on the rim of the valley, a fringe of denude trees etching a black arabesque on its disk. A long yellow bar shot athwart the glooming spaces, penetrated for moment the shadows of

the woods and illuminated the speaker's face. His head was thrown back in sober poise, his ox eyes glowed with earnest seriousness, the lines of his face spoke a pathetic sincerity. Marvin almost envied him.

"No, I ain't got no gifts er education fer the regular work, but if I'z jest a licensed exhorter, I'd be the happiest man alive."

"I hope you will succeed next time, Brother Will. Come over and perhaps we can study together," Marvin said, rising.

Oliver watched him picking his way through the underbrush till lost to view in the shadows; then throwing his ax across his shoulder, he swung toward the cabin, singing lustily, "How firm a foundation."

Half-way the distance to the village, Marvin was confronted with the almost perpendicular side of one of the bare limestone mounds common to that section. The path wound around its base, but he chose to climb the barrier. In his present state of mind any physical exertion was welcomed. Following one of the many cow trails he soon emerged on its summit, and stood a moment a black isolated column. The dome above was filled with dense, opaque mist, and there was a stillness in the air that presaged change. Somewhere in the obscurity broke the staccato squak of geese fleeing southward.

He sat down and peered into the dark. Up to this time he had held in abeyance the final decision concerning his future. The revelation of his mother brought him face to face with unreckoned problems that clamored for some solution. Here in this isolated spot he would find the answer. Alone on the mountain top, in the very presence of God.

Until a few days ago he had accepted religion as he found it—blindly, loyally, unquestioningly. He had not sought to pry into the way of it or delve into its foundations. Now new phases of it confronted him. God's personal interference in the life of the individual challenged his faith. With all the egotism of youth and temperament he had not assumed that he was of so much value. How confused he became when he thought of it. How confusing to God it must be listening to all the prayers that welled up from the millions of earth. Did he hear them? And hearing, did He pick and choose those He would heed? selecting one to honor and another to dishonor? humiliating this one, exalting that? Could one fathom the secret of His rule of procedure? determine if he fell among the favored? The time-old problems—problems the theologians have given their lives seeking to make plain, only to confuse in clouds of obscurity—rose to baffle him, sink him deeper in the mire. If God was going to order his life in spite of him, why pray at all? To be just He must do the

same with every life. Then if a man became a murderer or thief, who was to blame? Was it God who kept Will Oliver from the ministry? was forcing him into it against his will? Was someone outpraying Oliver? Was it possible if he prayed fervently enough to prevail over his mother's prayers, and God would make him a great artist instead of the preacher that the Bishop and his parents had prayed that he might become? Was there a balance of power in the amount of prayer? Could he by persistency overtake, annul the years of prayer prayed while he was helpless? Why should God put it in a man to love one thing and damn him if he did not do something else — something else that was repulsive — that he could not do? If he chose art God would checkmate him, bring him to abject failure, damn his soul. If he chose the ministry it seemed to him life would not be worth while, damnation preferable. He had gone over it again and again to always arrive in perplexity at the same blank wall. But he would not leave this spot till the matter was settled. He projected his mind into the future and saw himself in the role of preacher—a circuit-rider, going his rounds horseback, his saddle-bags stuffed with books, preaching in the bleak chapels, schoolhouses, under brush arbors. As a town preacher, Sunday after Sunday looking into the same faces, telling the same story; he even imagined himself clothed with the authority

of the presiding elder, moving a man of influence and power throughout the country, but the picture only filled him with repugnance; then over against it was that other picture that had burned itself into the very texture of his soul—an artist among artists; his pictures in the homes of the great, in the galleries of the world, his name among the immortals. No circumscribed honor must be his—his sphere of conquest must be the world. Then before him, blotting out the other pictures, rose his mother's face with the deep yearning eyes, grappling his soul, moving him against his will. She knew God, she talked to Him face to face; she it was who could bring him speedily from afar to her side. There was no escaping her intimacy with God. Had not God spared his life for this very purpose? Why did the Bishop interfere? why did he not die? It was wrong, cruel, to take advantage of a helpless, dying babe. He threw himself prone upon the ground, his face buried in his hands. He was filled with unutterable woe. There was borne to him through the night an etherialized voice—a voice that seemed to speak to him from the clouds.

“When through the deep waters I call thee to go
The rivers of woe shall not thee overflow.”

He listened intently, wonderingly; then ceased to reason. His imagination centered on his mother.

He saw her watching over him through the long nights as he tottered on the borderland; the look on her face as the Bishop lifted him in his arms; saw her through the years kneeling night after night alone with God, praying, praying — always one prayer. How her face would shine if he could go and tell her the prayer was answered. Perhaps his teachers were right; his dream of art was a delusion. What if he should succeed, become a great artist, and break his mother's heart? Gain the whole world and lose his own soul? What would weigh in the balance against the love of his mother? She had borne him, nursed him, he was bone of her bone, flesh of her flesh, his very brain and blood were a part of her.

"O God, I can't, I can't!" he cried.

He was now on his back, his eyes straining into the dark. At last he seemed to feel the spell of his mother's prayers, the silent kneeling form would not away, her presence overwhelmed him.

"God help me, help me!" he moaned, desperate, distraught. And the answer came in quavering diminuendo.

"I'll never—no, never—no, never forsake——" then silence, and darkness, and the lone mountain top.

An hour later he rose from the ground. His limbs were numb with cold and his clothes dropped moisture, but he did not know. He went swinging blithely

along, tossing aside the bushes, whistling a snatch of music-hall song that he had picked up in the city, and was not conscious of its incongruity. The incubus had fallen from his brain and he was conscious only of an eagerness for the warmth of his home and the presence of his mother.

His parents were waiting him. They looked up relieved when he entered.

"Son, where have you been? We could not imagine what was keeping you."

He threw off his hat and sat down with the air of a man who has just made a safe harbor, and is glad. "I've been up to see Will Oliver. We are going to study for the ministry."

His mother gave a little joyous cry, tears coming into her eyes. His father's face lit up.

"Son, you have made a wise choice," he said.

Before Mrs. Garner went to sleep that night she said to her husband:

"I'll never doubt again that God answers prayer."

"Then pray that he become a bishop," returned her husband.

CHAPTER V.

There is nothing bleaker, less inviting to the instinct of worship, or less calculated to rouse the esthetic and spiritual sensibilities than the "meetin' house" that once dotted the settlements of the Western prairies, and even yet linger in obscure places, reminders of the stern fiber of the religious pioneer's soul that needed not the stimuli of stained-glass and pipe organ to coax it *en rapport* with the Unseen.

To one of these rude structures, crowning an eminence, stark against the sky, could be seen converging some months later on a raw December day, horsemen, farm wagons, dilapidated buggies. In one of the vehicles of the better kind travelled Marvin Garner and his pastor, Rev. Stewart Nelson. The Rev. Nelson was short and stocky. His sallow, flabby cheeks had the appearance of having once been bloated, but now succumbed to some inevitable shrinking process in keeping with the downgrade of his fortune. His pale blue eyes had a weary look that persistently sought to appear deceptively cheerful. In fact, a perennial good humor was Rev. Nelson's stock-in-trade. He seemed to realize his deficiencies in those gifts that appealed to and win the

hearts of the faithful—eloquence, power in prayer, commanding presence. So he strove to make amends in unfailing good fellowship—to amuse and entertain. He was successful, but like all success it came at the price of great effort. No one suspected the cost of that easily wreathing, faded countenance, the jolly word, the unheard of joke. But Nelson knew, and often while he made merry for those who demanded merriment his thoughts were with an invalid wife, a houseful of half-fed, half-clothed children—and he must laugh and make others laugh or they go hungry. His support, meager as it was, depended upon his ability to please, and please he did. But no one, not even his wife, knew that he as regularly studied his *Puck* as he did his Bible preparatory to a visit among his people. And how often that scolding *Puck*, and many of its ilk—the novel, the Sunday paper, were dangled before their eyes in scathing denunciation as vanity of vanities, offsprings of the devil, wolves in sheep's clothing stealing into the homes to desecrate its sanctity, destroy its children.

O ye unknown punster, ye modern jester, fool! a paeon to you—you who win the minister's flock, give point to the orator's platitudes, make clever the dinner talk, embellish the scientist's lecture, help the multitude recover from the Sunday sermon, coaxing us to smile when the heart is sad—let others filch

your wit, hold you up to contempt; we praise and envy you—you unsung fools!

To-day was the occasion of the Brushy quarterly conference. Marvin and his pastor tied their horses to the low-hanging branches of a live-oak and turned toward the chapel. Two woe-begone figures stood before the door. They faced each other in conversation, occasionally glancing toward the house fearfully, as if within lurked some threatening foe. The ogre was Presiding Elder May; the uneasy youths were candidates for the ministry—Will Oliver and J. Martin Nichols.

Once in the semi-darkness of the unceiled walls, and the eye had grown used to the obscurity, a massive, silent form in the pulpit challenged attention. The Elder was broad of girth, with round bullet head of closely cropped hair. Two ferret eyes looked over the round, well-fed cheeks, and from their outer angle there radiated fanshaped fields of weblike wrinkles. The dignity of his office sat heavily upon him. He was a good man. A man of convictions, though narrow ones. Few men can be broader than their horizon, and his was not broad. His knowledge was small, but the pity of it was not in its smallness, but in its wrongness. But his limitations, perhaps, the better fitted him for his sphere. A religious pioneer, exerting a restraining influence, sowing seed best fitted to the soil he farmed; but who can say how long

those seed will go on multiplying, cumbering the ground, when it has become ripe for a richer sowing?

He rose and "lined" a hymn in a deep, sonorous voice. The congregation sang it leisurely, laggingly, treasuring the words as rich morsels under the tongue. The couplet finished, he flung them another, and thus antiphonally they slowly plodded through the verses. After a prayer, that in its comprehensiveness took in "before time was," all time to come, all things animate and inanimate, up to and including the trembling recruits, the business of the day was taken up and dispatched. The important item was a report of the Elder's and pastor's salaries. *Puck's* jokes had made good.

The candidates were given seats of honor facing the pulpit, and the examination into their fitness was begun. It was meager enough, but not too meager to fill one aspirant's soul with terror. Marvin had spent many nights preparing Oliver for this ordeal; but the memory of other failures played havoc with any measure of knowledge that might have been instilled.

"Brother Oliver, what is gender?"

Brother Oliver straightened up, scratching his head in perplexity. "Gender? yes, gender—who is gender? Yes, I know—gender——" He assumed a sudden affectionate attitude toward his neighbor,

caught desperately at the whispered words—"gender—why—to be shore—gender. Gender is the difference between sex." He sank back relieved, mopping his brow with a red bandanna.

"You have the idea—'denotes the distinction in sex,' I believe is the way Smith puts it. Now, Brother Oliver, tell me to which gender you belong?"

Oliver's eyes fairly started from his head; he leaned sidewise again painfully, betrayingly. "Me—gender—which gender I belong——" He searched his brain in vain. Then he remembered, Brother Marvin drilled him on that, it was coming back to him—common—neuter—neuter—now, which was it? He became confused, but at last looked up beamingly. "Gender—me? Why, to be shore—I'm common gender."

At last the examination came to an end. Oliver's dream was realized. He was licensed to exhort. He was cast down with humility. He hugged the slip of paper giving him man's permission to do what he believed God wanted him to do, but without which he dared not do, as a miser would hug a sack of gold. It was the final, the unquestionable proof of his call—the paper was in his pocket and he could free his talent from its swaddling clothes, throw the napkin to the winds; he was as he expected to be—the happiest man alive. He bubbled over with gratitude. He loved everybody and everything.

PART TWO.**CHAPTER I.**

'A March sun poured floods of yellow light over the black level stretches of farmland. The great oval dome that shut down on it glistened like blue crystal; but high in the wide spaces and over the landscape swept a fierce commotion in which still lingered the bite of winter.

Marvin buttoned his overcoat closer, encouraged his horse to quicken his pace, and wished himself at the end of the journey. Presently he turned from the road and stopped at a rude cabin. A bareheaded, bearded man, followed by numerous towheaded progeny, stepped out the door at his approach and regarded him with curious interest.

"I want to go to Whiterock schoolhouse, and I'm not sure I'm on the right road?" Marvin inquired.

"Yes, you'r O. K. Keep straight ahead till you come to the next turn; take the left hand—it runs right to the door. Something goin' on over there to-day?" the stranger asked.

"Preaching," Marvin replied. Then it struck him

that this man might be one of his flock and he ought to be more specific. It was possible he had not heard of his "appointment."

"I'm the new circuit-rider," he hastened to add. "I wrote my steward, Mr. Simons, that I'd preach there to-day."

"Hadn't heard," said the other, evidently disappointed, turning to go.

"I'd be glad to have you come over and hear me sometime," said Marvin, cordially. Instinctively he felt that the man did not have an exalted opinion of the cloth. It piqued him. He would like to show him that his generalization was based on too scant a showing—there were preachers and preachers.

"Oh, I'm much obliged to you." The stranger turned and faced the horseman again. "But if you want to know the truth, Parson, I don't take no stock in religin an' religin don't take no stock in me. You'r a stranger er you wouldn't ask Bill Hinkle over to yer meetin'. I'd stampede yer flock, shore. Ol' Parson Hightower's done prayed me into hell five year ago. No, if you want to stand in with the pillars fight shy of Bill Hinkle an' his crowd."

"Mr. Hinkle, my name is Garner. I am glad I met you. I like your frankness, and I'd like to see more of you. If you won't come to hear me preach may I come over to see you sometime? I'll promise not to talk religion—unless you say so."

Hinkle was pleased at this unexpected friendliness. But it was against his principles to make any show of compromise with things religious since he had been so summarily disposed of. Then it flashed into his mind that here was an opportunity to get revenge on his Elisha. By cultivating the young preacher he would spite Parson Hightower and perhaps cause dissension in the fold.

"Well, now, if you ain't furd of the consequences, you'll find me roun' yere most any day 'tendin' to my own bizness. Farmin' an' horseracin' is my lines."

"Thank you," said Marvin. He rode nearer and offered his hand. Hinkle took it, looking the other over dubiously. "Goodbye, Mr. Hinkle, and you may look for me."

The weeks slipped by. Spring was stealing over the land, and the hedges and meadows were veiled in a faint green mist. One evening at this time, Marvin sat thoughtfully at the window of his rude study. Across the line of his vision plowmen moved back and forth, back and forth. He faced the west and as their gaunt, black figures crept against the red glow of the sky, he thought of them, millions of others, toiling from sun to sun, in heat and cold, that they might feed and clothe themselves and keep up the toil—and in the end, perhaps, burn in a lake of fire and brimstone forever, for he had not yet come

to question the dogmas taught at that time. He felt a great pity stir within him, not dreaming that the objects of it were happier than he. Happy in their ignorance and narrowness, for they were not conscious of either. That only by bringing to them knowledge and a wider vision would they be filled with unrest. Perhaps the happiest are those who keep nearest to the ground, who live closest within the round of the animal functions. But did God intend that man should be happy?

Marvin rose, put on his hat, and struck across the fields. During the months he had been in Whiterock he had made good his word to Bill Hinkle. In fact, he had come to find in that individual's frank originality an unexpected source of entertainment. It was toward his farm that he now turned his steps. Already he could see him across the black levels crawling behind his plow.

"Good evening, Mr. Hinkle."

"Hello, Parson," the other said, lifting the plow from the furrow and scraping the clinging dirt from its point. He turned it on its side and stood facing his visitor. "Glad to see you," he said.

"You won't let me interfere with your work, Mr. Hinkle?" Marvin began tentatively.

"Oh, I'm always ready for an excuse to take a rest. There ain't no danger of Bill Hinkle ever workin' hisself to death."

"Yet they tell me that you are one of the best farmers on Whiterock."

There was a movement of Hinkle's beard that told of a hidden smile.

"Well, I don't know. When a man has a wife and a houseful of children to support he nacherly does his darndest, but he don't deserve no credit fer that. I guess, though, you've heard a good many things 'bout Hinkle you wouldn't care to mention to his face?"

"No, Mr. Hinkle, nothing you have not told me."

"Guess ol' Parson Hightower ain't been doin' his duty, then."

"But I have wondered, Mr. Hinkle, what you farmers think of as you work alone all day in the fields."

"Well, Parson, I wouldn't like to slander my neighbor, so I couldn't speak fer nobody but myself."

"Then suppose you speak for yourself?"

"If you put it that way, I reckon I might 'commerdate you, an' I'm as 'commerdatin' as the next, if it don't hit my pocket too hard. I don't keep no tab on my headpiece, but I guess mostly I wonder 'bout the seasons — if there'll be too much rain er too little — how cotton an' corn will turn out; if I'll make enough to pay my store account, keep the stock through the winter an' feed an' clothe my family; an'

you know there's a new mouth an' little red squirmin' body comin' regular as spring."

He looked up, a sly twinkle in his eye, to see how the Parson was taking his confidences. "If my wife keeps it up same's she's been doin' last ten years, Hinkles 'll be as plenty as blackbirds. But I guess she ain't no more to blame than I am——" He looked down sheepishly in spite of his evident intention of embarrassing the youth. He kicked his foot into a clod. "When you git enough, Parson, jest say so."

"It's very interesting—go on."

"Well, Parson, to be square with you, I think 'bout my children biggest part of the time—'bout their schoolin' an' what's goin' to become of them. Edjucation comes higher every year with all the outlandish books they put children to studyin' nowaday. Though I can't see they'r any better fer it. But you can't tell, an' I give 'em every chanct—maybe Mary will turn out a teacher er Bill take to the law er docterin'—an' I think 'bout all that. Then when the sun goes down an' I crawl on ol' Jack there an' start fer home, I think of the cornbread bakin' an' ham fryin' an' coffee boilin', till I can almost taste 'em; an' the children crowdin' roun' me, remindin' me of different sizes of myself, an' the baby in my lap, an'——" he hesitated,—“an' the long night of sleep an' rest—

an'——" He burst into a wide-mouth laugh. "Pshaw, Parson, this sounds foolish. I guess I think a little 'bout everything — things come an' go in yer head till you can't keep track of 'em. Most of the time I ain't really thinkin'; I'm jest tendin' to my bizness, watchin the harness, whippin' up the horses, turnin' the corners, lookin' at the dirt curl off the plow. Often I fergit everything, an' when I come to myself it seems I'd jest woke from a dream, an' jest goin' roun' an' roun' the field like a dead man er a machine—I guess it's mostly that way." He paused, his face sober. Taking a fresh chew of tobacco he looked up. "That 'bout covers the ground, Parson, less'n I'd touch on the subject you said we wouldn't discuss."

"Religion, you mean? Do you think about that?"

"Well, I guess, nacherly, a feller would think 'bout what's done put 'im in hell. An' I don't mind talkin' to you. You'r different from the preachers 'bout yere. Somehow you make me feel you really care a little fer Bill Hinkle, an' not jest after gittin' him to jine the church an' go through some rigamarole to save his soul when he dies. I think 'bout that a good deal, off an' on, an' I have concluded I'm not investin' much in the grave. I'm interested in Bill Hinkle an' his family now. Woudn't want to hurt yer feelin's, Parson, but if you want my honest opinion, I don't have much respect fer the God they

preach 'bout yere. Why, I wouldn't treat a dog like He did that feller Adam fer eatin' the apple. They say He was so mad 'bout it He had to kill a son to git hisself in a good humor with the rest of us pore devils who didn't have a chanct at the apple. Why, it would be jest as sensible fer me to whip all my ten kids fer the fault of one, not to speak of killin' one to git myself in a good humor. An' it seems the Son's dyin' was a failure after all, fer you've got to be converted an' baptized an' jine the church er you'll be damned jest the same. An' then you'd have to have it done by all the churches to make shore you'd wake up in kingdom come. Must 'a' been a God of some kind to 'a' started things, but I'd stake my last dollar the one that made this world an' man never was guilty of no sech tomfoolery."

He paused, but Marvin remained silent.

"I think ol' Hightower would be disappointed if I happened to miss hell, he's been perdictin' an' pronouncin' curses on me so long. You see it happened this way. At one of his big meetin's he ast all who wanted to go to heaven to stan' up. Well, everybody stood up but me an' a han'ful on the back benches. That seemed to rile Hightower, an' pintin' to us an' callin' us pore deluded fools, he thundered out if we wanted to go to hell, to rise. Well, it was too great a chanct to let slip, an' I rose up an' tol' him I did, that it looked like the other place was goin' to

be too crowded. An' to rub it in, I ast him to pray fer me to 'rive safe. Well, it 'most broke up the meetin'. But he took me at my word an' prayed most onmerciful fer my eternal damnation in the fire that's never quenched—an' somethin' 'bout the worm that never dies. But I've got the joke on him. I tell him I'm shore of the other place fer I've never knowed one of his prayers to be answered. But we git 'long first rate—belong to the same lodge, tell each other yarns, an' 'casionally I give him a dollar fer the missionary."

CHAPTER III.

The hedges hung wilted under the vertical rays of the August sun, grey with a film of dust that settled on them from the highway. The face of the country was a dark green expanse of languidly rustling corn and drooping cotton. They were silent and deserted now save where a bird panted in the shadows of rank stalks or a rabbit, made bold by the stillness, hopped cautiously along the rows.

Along the black road, men on foot and horseback crawled slowly through the white glare toward a common point. This was Hunt's woods, the scene of the annual camp-meeting. Here in the centre of a small clearing stood a great framework of tree trunks covered with decaying boughs and leaves—a great elevated brush heap. It was this that the men came to rehabilitate. Already the early arrivals squatted about on the ground, smoking as they engaged in desultory conversation. Two wagons, with high sideboards, stood in the shadows of the trees. Others joined the group at intervals with friendly greetings and bantering remarks.

"Well, yere he comes at last," said one of the men, rising. "Now, we'll git to work."

"Yes, it's Barton." There was a movement of welcomed activity.

"Well, boys," said the individual, coming up; "I see you air watin' as usual. Best crowd of waiters I ever seen."

"None yer jokes, Barton, er we'll send you home. We knowed we'd have to do everything over when you come, so we didn't do it. This ain't a day to throw away yer energy on extra work."

"Well, that excuse ain't good no longer. Let's git at it. Yer boys git a move on you—we'll need a couple loads of bresh time you git it yere."

The wagon manned by two overgrown youths, rolled into the woods. The men under Barton's directions began to demolish the decayed roof.

"Wouldn't like to be hard on the Lord's anointed, but the last man that held forth yere was a weak brother," said Barton, standing in the shade of the trees and looking up at the men.

"Bloodsworth, you mean? Well, he had his pints. Not every parson is cut out fer camp-meetin' work. Then he'd jest married him a wife, an' you can fer-give a man a good deal under them circumstances."

The speaker was a tall, angular, bony faced man, with a scant beard.

"There you begin the ol' song, Jones," said a little wiry fellow, from his perch on one of the cross-beams, talking over an armful of brush. "Always blamin'—"

it on the wimin. Anyway you can't make that excuse fer Brother Garner."

"No; an' I doubt if I ever will, Banks. There's a man that thinks of nothin' but savin' souls—then he's too sensible. I think it 'uz time the conference was sendin' us some one who can mix it with the other preachers. Not a parson that makes Whiterock gits better crowds 'n he does."

"Well, you know my opinion of Garner. He's one in a thousand. Hadn't been he's jest beginnin' we'd never got 'im, an' it'll be jest like 'em to move him at the end of the year," said Barton.

A little stocky man, with a mop of white beard, interrupted in a cracked voice.

"Sensible er not, an' with all his vartues, I guess you'll find Garner's a man. An' Jones'll find he'll be fallin' in love an' maryin' like the rest of us as be nacheral men——"

"Right you air Hunt," said the voice from the roof. "They never git so wrapped up in savin' souls that somebody in the shape of a female don't come 'long, sooner er later, an' wake up the flesh. I ain't sayin' it's anything agin him. The Lord made us that way—preachers same as the rest. Then the Scripchers says 'increase an' multiply.' Men like Jones yere don't count. Why the good Lord lets sech specimens be born is a miracle of extravagance—jest a wastin' of his power. 'An' what 'ud become of

the race if we all shirked our duty like he does, the Lord only knows."

There was a chorus of approvals.

"Good thing you air out of reach, Jim Banks; an' a good Christian you air, slanderin' 'a man to his face. It makes me blush fer you. If you knowed it you'r better cut out fer pilin' bresh then usin' yer headpiece."

What might have been an interminable personal bandinage was cut short by the arrival of the wagons piled high with freshly lopped boughs. When they were emptied, the conversation was set goin' by one of the workers heretofore silent.

"Speakin' of Brother Garner, I guess Brother Barton 'bout took his measure—he's one in a thousand. To know a man you want to live with him when he ain't got on his Sunday clothes. Well, I've lived with him all week an' listened to him preach on Sunday, an' he preaches better in the home than in the pulpit. If I ever seen a man of prayer he's one. Many's the time my wife's gone to his room, thinkin' he's out, an' foun' him on his knees. An' he pours over his books day an' night. Weren't fer sustainin' grace he couldn't stand the strain. Sally says if she ever gits religin it'll be at his meetin'. Yes, if the Lord don't bless his labors, the fault will be with the Lord, fer he's shorely a marvel of grace."

"An' you do right in tellin' us Hays. It ain't no

betrayin' of confidence, an' it do raise a man in yer estimation to hear them as knows 'im best speak high of him. An' one could 'a' gussed from his sermons he's a man of prayer—though 't ain't always fine words that makes fine deeds."

"An' yet," said Hunt; "Parson Hightower says his sermons lack meat. He don't stress the doctrines; though he do tell movin' stories an' make you see pichers. It's doctrine that counts. Without 'em we'd might as well belong to any other of the sects. What our youngsters need to bring 'em to repentance is fire an' brimstone. They want to be dangled over hell till they smell it burnin'. I ain't sayin' nothin' agin Brother Marvin's preachin', fer it's shorely edifyin', but it lacks the doctrines. But he's young an' will likely take 'em on in time."

"Well, I guess the main thing is savin' souls, an' if pichers an' stories will do it, I say let's have 'em. Parson Hightower's had his try, an' you can't say he ain't give us plenty doctrine an' hell fire. Why, he's already prayed Hinkle——"

"To the devil," broke in a deep voice behind the men. They looked up in consternation. They were superstitious enough to feel uneasy at the unlooked for interruption. Banks, from his eminence, whose outlook was limited to the trees and the outlying fields, was taken so by surprise, thinking the voice came from the sky, that he lost his balance and fell head-

long into the brush. But the men's incipient fear was quickly allayed. Turning, they discovered Hinkle at the edge of the woods writhing in silent laughter.

"Talk of angels an' you'll hear the rustle of their wings," said Jones, facetiously, as Hinkle approached.

"You look more like you'd smelt the breath of the forked-tongue. Though you know I don't believe in neither."

"Now, we'll have it," said Banks, recovering his feet and flinging a bough at the newcomer, as he peered down from his perch.

"Hello, Banks," said Hinkle, glancing upward to the speaker outlined against a white cloud. "I'd think you'd feel embarrassed up so close to heaven?"

"None yer irreverence, Hinkle," said Jones.

"Don't talk to me of irreverence after what I've heard. I ain't questionin' the powerfulness an' good intentions of yer God. I ain't sayin' He can't save souls through Bloodsworth an' Hightower, with er without doctrine, which is what you do. You seem to have great faith in the Lord usin' Garner in savin' the lost as you call 'em, but what you mean is that you've great faith in Parson Garner usin' the Lord. The power is all in the man. Yer God can't git up a whimper 'thout 'im——"

"Blasphemy, blasphemy! Wonder the Lord don't

strike you down in yer tracks, Bill Hinkle," protested old man Barton.

"Fer sayin' what you think? But he don't—takes a man to do that, an' none of you air goin' to let God use you that way—you know Hinkle too well. I notice God don't make you do what you don't like——"

"Give 'im rope," interrupted Barton; "he'll hang hisself."

"Course, I'm standin' yere sizzlin' 'cause I like it," said Banks, sarcastically.

"What makes you do it?"

"The hope of savin' sinners like you from a hotter place than this."

"Good fer you, Banks," said Jones, elated. "Give 'im ernother."

"Down at Greenville Crossin' while ago," went on Hinkle, unheedingly, "I passed Elder Savage an' a batch of Campbellites cleanin' out the long hole, an' when I ast 'em what they'z doin' in the water they said jest what you did, Banks, 'Goin' to save ten sinners like you, Hinkle'; an' the Baptists up at Union, an' the Hardshells over at Firm Foundation, an' the Presbyterians on Everlastin' Hill, an' the Sanctificationists over on the prairie, air all goin' to open up 'long the same lines. All savin' sinners an' 'damnin' everybody that ain't saved their way, an' it's

all the doin's of the Lord to let them tell it. Now, suppose Bill Hinkle takes a notion to be saved, where'd he go? Which outfit can give him a clear title to kingdom come? Which can give Bill Hinkle what he ain't already got? Who'd trust Hinkle any quicker after he got up from the mourner's bench shoutin' glory, er crawled out of the creek with salvation drippin' from him, er went up respectable an' give his han' to the parson, believin' he's one of the elected an' chosen from before the foundation——"

"Bill you'r a regular Jannes an' Jambres kind of a feller—settin' yerself agin the truth," said Jones.

"I'm not 'quainted with the team," said Hinkle, sarcastically; "but I'm glad to hear I ain't the only sensible man hereabout."

"Bill, you've missed yer callin'—you 's cut out fer a spouter; but you sing a mighty ol' song. I guess there's ten thousand in hell to-day that said jest what you've said, an' repentin' when it's too late, jest as you'll do," said Hays, reprovingly.

"Yes, Bill, you ought to rig up an arbor an' start a meetin' of yer own—you'd——"

"Too many fools," Hinkle returned with good humored hopelessness.

"Present company excepted, of course," said Jones.

"No; there's no fools yere, an' you'd never find it out if there was, Jones. But this will never do men," he broke off; "argyfyin' never built a tabernickle yet.

Let's git to work," and he began tossing up the boughs.

"You'r the queerest feller I ever seen, Bill," said Banks. "You don't believe half you say. Yere you been a hour makin' light of the Lord's work an' now you turn right roun' an' begin to help it on."

"I ain't doin' this fer the Lord; it's fer Garner. He's a man. I take stock in men. I'll bet my ol' hat he knocks the socks off any meetin' in the neighborhood. Yes, I'm bettin' on Garner. When a man like that gits hol' of God he does something with 'im."

"Bill Hinkle, that's the worst word Brother Garner's got yet. I'm 'fraid something must be wrong with 'im after all. I hope not, but——"

The arrival of another load of brush turned the conversation into other channels.

All the afternoon they worked industriously constructing the primitive temple, moved by the same instincts, impulses, that inspired men ten centuries before to build rude altars and offer sacrifices.

At last the sun blazed in its firey course down the heavens, dropped a red disk in the green fields, rolled from sight, leaving behind it a bloody wake; but not more sanguinary than the path over which had travelled the religion of these men.

"Boys, that's the best arbor we've ever had at Whiterock," said Barton, puffing a cloud of smoke from his freshly lighted pipe.

"An' the best man you ever had at Whiterock 'll preach in it," returned Hinkle.

"An' the devil's own 'll be yere to hear 'im," said Jones.

"Jones fer once you speak better'n you know," said Hinkle.

"Well, I hope Brother Garner'll convert 'em—'long with Hinkle," said Banks, conciliatingly.

They began to disperse. Rising with slow, stiffened movements they walked off in the gathering dusk, singly, in groups; their pipes trailing an acrid incense on the air.

The arbor stood a huge top-heavy spider; its roof projecting on the sky a thousand gasping, writhing tentacles.

CHAPTER IV.

The camp-meeting had been in progress some days. The arbor that was the pride of Barton could no longer shelter the throngs that nightly were drawn to it. He and his satellites were exultant. Already they were winning people from the competing services a few miles distant by force of their greater crowds, enthusiasm and popularity of their preacher.

To-night Marvin sought the seclusion of the woods for a season of prayer. As he knelt in the dark there floated on the air the hum and bustle of the camp—fragments of conversation, cries and laughter of children, neighing of horses, the rattle of cooking utensils. Far across the fields, where, the last few days, there seemed to brood a mystical, faith-compelling sombreness, to those who could see and feel, there sounded the rumble of wagons, the quick beat of hurrying hoofs, the steed of some wild youth who hastened to the scene of the religious exhibition. Perhaps the personality of the preacher, the crowd, the sermon, the presence of a face, would win his allegiance and faith, and make of him a life-long partisan of a dogma the import of which he would never understand.

But the notes of the activities going on about him struck upon an unresponsive ear; Marvin's whole being was concentrated in a mighty besiegment of the All-Powerful. He demanded a definite token of recognition. He must have tangible proof from the Unseen. The burden of his prayer was, "Give me fifty souls—give me Bill Hinkle—to-night." He looked up, his wide-open eyes straining into the dark. Through rifts in the foliage he saw a patch of sky, one white star glinted in his face. He gazed at it as if it might be the eye of God; then, like a throb of the pulses, the supreme egotism and presumption of his demands flashed through his mind. He, an obscure, ignorant youth, who was an object of interest to only a few hundred people, to a father and mother miles away, seeking to influence, put to the test, the God who created the universe, flung the worlds and planets into space and held them eternally in their orbits. Could that being heed any cry he might send up from this silent spot in the woods? He fell on his face groaning in spirit against the thought. It was the devil assaulting him. He remembered the temptation on the mount, and cried, "Get thee behind me, satan." Persuaded himself that he did not doubt; insisted to his soul that he did have faith, that God would hear him. As he lay on the damp mould, he found himself listening to the small sounds in the woods—the birds flitting in the treetops; rab-

bits hopping on the dead leaves; popping of branches, that began to straighten with the cool of night. He felt something cold on his hand and drew it back with an instinctive sense of fear. Then an awkward pup of precocious growth began to jump fawningly onto his knee. It pleased him to take this unlooked for appearance as a hopeful omen. The insistent friendliness of the pup appealed to his mood. God had made it too. He was conscious of a sudden kinship, of a tenderness going out to it, going out to all created things. In his soul there throbbed an all-compassing love. He drew the wriggling cub to him and pressed it a moment to his bosom. Ah, the dumb animals. What part did they play in the plans of God? Were they left helpless to a blind fate? Did God not concern himself with the lowest of his creatures? Did he give them no instinct of worship? no voice to speak to him? to tell of their woes? to ask for his intervention? Was it to the powerful alone he gave ear, laid bare his arm, reversed his laws, worked his miracles? Were the poor, helpless things that creep and crawl at the mercy of all the higher orders above them? He rose and hastened from the trees. He must get away from his thoughts.

When he reached the open he could see the throng already surging into the tabernacle, the torch-lights throwing their shadows in grotesque shapes against the foliage and dark expanse of sky. A subdued

rumble of voices rose from the multitude. There floated on the air the odor of fresh dirt, burning wood, decaying vegetation, stale food, and an acrid smell of animals. In the dark sounded the stamping of feet, neighing of horses, staccato yelp of dogs, prowling for the offal of the camp.

At Marvin's appearance some one started a camp-meeting tune that was eagerly caught up by the worshippers and grew in volume till it drowned all other sounds. When it was finished, he rose and stood a moment silently looking down upon the upturned faces, his tall form a black silhouette against the glare of light. There was an expectant hush. Then he spoke; his clear magnetic voice ringing musically. In simple, forceful words he pictured vividly, as with stroke of skilled brush, the doom of the lost, the heaven of the saved. In an earnestness tender with solicitude he pleaded with the sinners to come to the mourners' bench and seek salvation. Talked like a mother persuading a wayward child. So sensitive was his imagination to its own images, he saw them lost—burning forever in unquenchable fires. How he yearned to see them saved. Tears began to roll down his cheeks; with outstretched arms, his body tense with vibrant emotion, he sobbed, "Come."

The effect of the word was electric. He paused. There was a moment of intense silence, then the

congregation burst with a mighty assaulting voice into song:

“Oh, turn, sinner turn, turn, sinner turn,
May the Lord help you turn,
Oh, turn, sinner turn, why will you die?”

The penitents began to hurry forward with blanched faces, staring eyes, weeping convulsively. Falling at the benches they cried out as if in mortal fear, begging for mercy, groaning, agonizing in shrieks and wails that broke like a bedlam through the din of song.

Then above the multitude towered a great shaggy head, and Bill Hinkle came forward with steady tread, unabashed, and, shaking Marvin's hand, dropped in the straw. Following close upon his heels came ten, twenty, thirty young men, and knelt about him. The religious stared in amazement. For an instant they forgot to sing. There broke in every direction shouts of exultation: “Thank he Lord,” “Glory to God,” “The devil trimbles,” from Parson Hightower. Someone started a new tune and they caught it up like things possessed:

“Shout, shout, we're gainin' groun',
Oh, glory hallelujah.
The love of God is a-comin' down,
Oh, glory hallelujah.”

The saved pushed their way among the mourners—trampled them, shouted unintelligable words in their ears, beat them on the back, smothered them in their eagerness to save. Barton and Jones were beside themselves. The Campbellites were routed. There had never been anything like it at Whiterock. If Hinkle “come through” his influence would sweep a hundred into the fold. They went wild in anticipation. They hugged each other, pounded each other, jumped on the benches and shouted “glory” at the top of their voices. The women rushed about screaming, throwing themselves in the straw, fainting, going into trances.

Marvin moved about carried out of himself—he felt possessed of superhuman power. He had but to grasp the hand of a penitent, lift him to his feet, look into his eye and tell him he was saved, to see him break into rejoicing, crying out his deliverance; some declaring they could see into the very throne of heaven, see the great king seated upon it, hear the angels singing songs of rejoicing.

Sally Hays was one of the penitents. As Marvin took her hand she threw herself upon his bosom in passionate abandon, clinging to him convulsively. Marvin freed himself as best he could and led her to her mother. But again and again she returned, throwing her arms about him, looking into his eyes, shouting his praises, her gratitude.

Then Bill Hinkle rose, flinging his arms right and left, sweeping all obstructions down before him. He grasped his friends and enemies, impartially, in his bear-like embrace, belaboring them unmercifully. They bore it heroically—Hinkle's conversion was unmistakably orthodox. The young men broke into like demonstrations. But as Marvin stood among them proudly, triumphantly, he suddenly fell sober; staggered like one dazed by an unexpected blow. A terrible truth was forced upon him. The odor of spirits that were not holy was strong upon the air.

Marvin had thought he and God alone were responsible for the great work. But Hinkle knew better.

CHAPTER V.

Marvin took his seat beside Sally. Mr. Hays gave the sleepy horses a lash, and they rolled into the lane. Marvin still lived in the incidents of the night. Surely his faith had been justified, his prayers answered; yet he was overcome with uneasiness and misgiving. A reaction had set in that left him supremely dejected. His success had been his undoing. It had brought him, instead of confidence and assurance, confusion and doubt. Perhaps it was not wise to seek to deflect the Ruling Powers from their commonplace course of activity. But had he? When the religious frenzy was raging at its zenith, when souls were being saved by the score, the thought was suddenly borne in upon him: Is this God's work? does he save in this way? Was not it a fanatical outburst of pure animal emotion? Why should God plunge men into uncontrollable madness so that they would wound themselves, trample upon others, to bespeak to them his forgiveness? He sought to dismiss the thought as a temptation of the evil one. All his life he had heard good men and women speak of their entrance upon the religious life through similar experiences. Perhaps God allowed good to come out of

evil in his great compassion for human ignorance and weakness. But the doubt came again and again. He knew nothing of psychology, hypnotic suggestion and kindred subjects, and so could not seek in them an explanation of the phenomena.

Then he thought of Bill Hinkle's unaccountable conversion; of the young men who flocked after him; of the odor of whiskey. What could be Hinkle's motive? Would he stop at no irreverence, no humiliation of himself, to please him? Surely God would not resort to such methods to answer prayer, compass his ends. Did God have anything to do with it after all?—no more than the puppy that licked his hand in the dark.

When the horses stopped at the gate, Marvin helped Sally and Mrs. Hays to the ground, and hastened to his room. He wanted to be alone. He sank into a chair in deep depression of spirit, vaguely conscious of the movements about him. He could hear the women preparing for bed; the noises at the barn, where Mr. Hays put up his team; the rattle of corn in the trough as he threw them their belated supper; the slamming of the barn door. He traced his movements as he approached the house and entered his wife's room. Then there was silence. He rose, lit a candle and began to undress slowly, moving hesitatingly, indefinitely, about the room. At last he sat down in his night shirt, his head drooping forward,

his eyes on the spot where he was accustomed to kneel before retiring. His mind began to search mechanically for petitions he would address to God. It seemed that the generosity of that being had estopped him. He would have to make larger demands. He did not feel equal to it; his enthusiasm was gone—his spirit cold and lifeless. His mood puzzled him. He felt he ought to be alarmed, but was not. After the high tension in which he had lived the past days, it came as a welcomed change.

As he sat thus, he became aware of a movement at his back. Some one had entered the room. He looked quickly around. A white-robed figure glided across the floor, and Sally stood before him, her eyes staring wildly, her bosom rising and falling convulsively. She threw herself upon him and cried noiselessly on his breast, her lips against his cheek. A great pity for her rose up within him, mastered him. He thought only of saving the girl from herself, of sparing her the humiliation that he knew would come with the morning. He lifted her in his arms, pushed her into the room and closed the door. For some minutes he stood leaning weak and trembling against the wall, then there was a sudden tumultuous response of passion. His blood began to burn through his veins with made impulse. He could still feel the warm embrace, the touch of naked flesh on naked flesh; the animal had at last responded to the animal.

He felt himself a fool—a weakling, effeminate. He turned to the door, his hand on the knob—it was not yet too late. Here at last was an impulse that could be calmed, that could find its answer and justification. The door opened to his pressure—from the dark there broke on his ear suppressed, muffled sobs. He closed the door and falling on his knees tried to pray. Again he felt the need of God. Long he lay with his face to the bare floor, muttering incoherently.

CHAPTER VI.

"I tell you, I've had a tough time of it," said J. Martin Nichols, boisterously confidential. "Worked my brain like a Trojan." He had indefinite ideas of Trojan activities, but liked to make the impression that he had a wide acquaintance with literature, and fell frequently into scholarly allusions. "You know I followed one of the biggest preachers in the conference—a regular Demosthenese. He had spoiled the people for anything but the very best. And there I was. You can imagine what a time I had. Not a conversion—camp-meeting a regular frost. The spiritual atmosphere at Post Oak is down to zero. Nothing but a bishop would satisfy them after McVoy. If you want a snap—follow some fellow that can't preach no better'n a calf, that's made a muddle of things till the people's disgusted—then it's a walk over. You may not preach a little bit, but it's so much better than they're used to they'll praise you to the sky and shell out the money like water. Anybody can succeed in them circumstances."

Marvin ignored the evident hint at the conditions under which he had labored; in fact he was too indifferent to be moved to resentment. But he was con-

scious of a feeling of disappointment. He had envied Nichols and Oliver, believing that their entrance into the ministry was free from mixed motives. They at least had the single eye; were moved solely by the love of the work. He regretted these frank confidences, but he could not turn away and he could not stop his friend.

"But I'm up on the apportionment," Nichols went on exultantly. "And let me tell you—I've learned already that's the main thing. You can save souls by the hundred, preach like a Cicero, but if you don't rustle the money, you're no good. I've had my eyes skinned, I tell you, and the sooner you catch on the better. If you don't want to starve half your life on some Cross Timber mission, stand in with the Elder. Let me tell you how—get the money. Learn to preach, but first learn to collect if you want to preach where it's worth while." He edged closer, grasping the lapel of Marvin's coat. "Yes, I have everything in full, but, between us, I had to take ten dollars out of my salary to do it. How you making it? Ain't heard a word from you for months."

As Marvin listened to Nichol's bluster, he found himself wondering if the career upon which he had entered so reluctantly was, after all, simply a matter of livelihood, salary—a scramble for the easy place and best pay? He had not come yet to know that salary is a standard by which man's ability and use-

fulness are measured. It is not, perhaps, the large salary that men covert, scheme and fight for, but the larger usefulness and responsibility that go with it. A kind of altruistic egotism justifies their aspirations and efforts.

He regarded his companion in mild surprise; his disappointment slowly deepened into contempt. Ever after he thought of him as shallow, cheap.

In the vestibule of the church had been improvised a book-stall, on which were displayed Bibles, hymnals, theological and religious works of the denomination. It was an attractive display—the velvety black covers and bright red and gold edges. An odor of printer's ink hovered in the air, touching the imagination with visions of long hours in close intimacy with clean pages and quickening thoughts of a brain long since crumbled into dust. Here was immortality incarnated in dead cold paper and ink. The flash of the eye and the thrill of the voice were gone, but the spirit still spoke with undying vitality.

Here, Marvin was attracted one day by a striking personage who stood above a lot of books that heretofore had not caught his eye. He stopped to take a closer survey of the man. He was of medium build, of plethoric habit, and his person seemed to radiate a compelling magnetism. A silk hat set jauntily on a round head of closely cropped hair. In his restless eyes there shone a good-humored twinkle. He was

evidently on the best of terms with himself and the world. Marvin made inquiry, and was glad to learn that he looked upon the well-known, popular and versatile Doctor Hill, of whom he had heard much and worshipped from afar. He drew nearer as if to touch the hem of his garment. The Doctor was talking to a crowd that now thronged him. Marvin listened, eager to treasure any pearl that might fall from his eloquent lips.

"Yes, brethren, take my word for it, it'll save twice the price in doctor's bills. I guarantee three chapters will cure the worst case of blues, melancholy, indisposition; five's a specific for nervousness, insomnia and that tired feeling. Yes, gentlemen, I don't guarantee it, but I believe the entire book will cure any mild case of insanity—how many copies? Beg your pardon—that's not what's the matter with you? Well, I wrote it an ought to know—buy a copy, read it, if you don't feel better, preach better, love your wife better, come back and get your—wife a copy."

"Oh, Hill ring off—of course we'll buy a copy. Anything, if you'll stop."

"Physician heal thyself——"

"It must be homeopathic——"

"No, patent," broke in the Doctor, "and I own the formula. Introductory price one dollar—mere matter of advertising the book. She's goes up to one-fifty next edition—now's your time to buy."

A bell clanged in the tower, and Hill hurried into the church with the men, keeping up a fusilade of jokes to the very door of the sanctuary.

When they were gone Marvin picked up the book and read the title, "Experiences and Worse." He bought a copy and slipping into a back pew opened it and began to read. It was simply an attempt at humor—crude, commonplace, even irreverent. When he had gone through it, he sat for some space musing, his eyes on the sea of heads, the hum of the proceedings in his ears, but he did not see or hear; he was undergoing again that hard fought battle of the mountain top, when alone with God, the stars in his eyes, he had given the fatal stab to his master passion and turned his back on its dead corpse, another's hope and aspiration animating his bosom. The waste of heart-aches, tears and bitter hours! How utterly useless in the light of recent revelations.

"Fool, fool," burst from his lips. His neighbor turned in surprise and he shrank back in confusion. The noted Hill—eloquent preacher, evangelist, what-not, the writer of a humorous book, a book of bad humor, and glorying in it. And Marvin Garner, silly that he was, had refrained from giving expression to the holiest sentiments, emotions, images that had stirred his soul as a wicked act. Cheap humor—noble painting. He could have laughed for joy. A lightness of spirit, a freedom, as if a burden had been

rolled from his shoulders, stole over him. He was conscious of a revitalizing process going on within. He would no longer feel shame-faced in the presence of the brethren; no longer walk among them condemning himself as guilty and unworthy. It was plain to him now that his mother was mistaken, her ideas old fashioned, and she had given the color of her conscience to his.

His old ambition sprang again into dominating life, and was welcomed. He would again take up his art, and while he proved his powers he would not only be earning a support but would gratify his parents and be engaged in a noble work. How he regretted the lost opportunities of the past year. He smiled as he thought of himself dropping on his knees crying out to God to take the love of art from his soul when he felt the impulse to paint stir within him. It was God who had given him the instinct, had meant that he should use it. He recalled the parable of the talents. Perhaps he was the man with the two. If so, it would be wrong not to put them out to usury. He felt now that he would find a satisfaction in his religious work that had heretofore been withheld. So he reasoned.

A few days before the close of the conference, the Bishop made an address on Home Missions. He had lately made a visitation in what was known as the Panhandle, a portion of the state bordering on the

Great Staked Plain, that at that time was rapidly filling with homeseekers, who were attracted to it by the cheapness of railroad and state lands that were being thrown on the market. Bishop Kneys pictured the conditions under which they lived with rare realism—the hardships of life in a new country, the crude homes in huts and dugouts, the drouths, the struggle for existence against a seemingly pitiless environment, the religious privations, and the eagerness of the people for the association and ministration of the missionary. In closing he spoke of the need of consecrated, self-sacrificing men for the work; but because of the meager salaries and the many hardships, he had hesitated to send men without their consent, and had sought this opportunity to ask for volunteers. It would be hard, but it would be heroic work, and would have its reward. He expressed the belief that there were still young men with the spirit of St. Paul who would heed the Macedonian cry.

He made a strong appeal, the audience was visibly moved; it seemed that under the spell of his eloquence he would be embarrassed by the number who would court martyrdom to prove their devotion and faith. When he sat down there was an instant of expectant silence. The speaker's hypnosis still rested on the multitude. There pulsed a current of telepathic waves from soul to soul. They waited anxiously for the appearance of the volunteer. The one who should

first offer himself for the work would be acclaimed a hero and move mightily upon the wrought-up sentiments of the people. It was a moment the politician would have coveted—that stage when the individual no longer thinks; reason for a time loses itself unaccountably, and a composite feeling dominates the audience as if it possessed but a single personality. Marvin had enough of the orator to recognize this. He felt an irresistible impulse to speak the word, drop on the smouldering tinder the spark, to see the multitude break to pieces at the glance of his eye, the wave of his hand, the sound of his voice. The Bishop had led up to a masterly climax, but another must give it completion.

His mother sat at his side. He turned quickly and asked her if she would like him to go. There was a moment's hesitation, then she bravely said: "If you feel that you ought, son, I'll be glad." The next moment he was on his feet, his straight, handsome form towering above the mass of heads. He walked lightly, with confident tread half way up the aisle. A thousand eyes were upon him; their hopes were to be realized; the hero had appeared; the Bishop's impassioned appeal was to bear speedy fruit. With an effort they held in check their pent up emotions as they waited for the youth to speak. With an inclination of his head toward the Bishop, who looked out over the tense faces beamingly, he addressed him;

swept the throng at a glance, then in a full, vibrant voice that fell on the ear like compelling music, he offered himself for the field.

"I am young, inexperienced, have little to offer, but, Bishop, if you can do no better, here am I, send me," he ended. Then he hesitated a moment, his head slightly bent forward, his face in thoughtful humility on the floor, and, turning, passed quickly to his mother's side. The multitude gasped, staring blankly, then broke into unreasoning tears as if stricken suddenly with dire calamity; the air quivered with a hissing intake of breath. The more emotional sprang to their feet in wild shouts of ecstasy, thanking God for such youths, praying benedictions upon him. The Bishop rose, shouting, "Glory to God," and began singing one of those hymns with sentimental words and sensuous music that wrench the emotions like a powerful stimulant. Men and women surrendered themselves to the impulse of the moment. They enjoyed all the thrill, the fine spiritual exaltation of the hero without any of the hardships he is called to undergo. They fell upon Marvin and his mother, shaking their hands, hugging them impartially, mobbing them in a religious frenzy.

From that moment Marvin was a marked man. No incident of the session produced so profound an impression. He became a hero in spite of himself. Men who had grown old in a life of sublime self-sacrifice

felt honored to shake his hand; strangers stopped him on the street to make his acquaintance; wonderful things were predicted of him. Men lost sight of the heroic spirit he had exhibited in admiration of him as an orator. But the recipient of all this interest was deeply humiliated after the first flush of triumph. For when he looked into his heart he knew that selfish motives alone had moved him—to try his powers, to please his mother, to go to a field where he could study Nature in the wild. That night he prayed fervently in deep contrition of spirit for forgiveness for what he had done. A hundred other preachers closed their eyes in unavailing regret that they had not been the fortunate one to make the most of the psychological moment. If the opportunity was presented again they would be equal to it. Such is the differences in the destinies of men. The few blaze the way; the mediocre masses see how easily it was done, could have done it themselves just as easily could they have seen, could they have known—perhaps they could.

PART THREE.

CHAPTER I.

The shadows thickened on the limitless stretches of the brown prairie. Below the sky-line objects were no longer distinguishable, but presented to the eye a formless monotonous drab, against which feeble yellow lights marked the straggling village of Benvenue. Along the crest of an adjacent divide a lone horseman moved slowly, dropped from sight, and presently reappeared within a square radiance that streamed from an open doorway. In answer to his haloo, a slim girlish figure rose indistinctly on a porch, and called out: "Is that you, Uncle Jim?"

"I'm Mr. Garner. I'm looking for Mr. Grogan's," Marvin replied, evasively.

"Oh, come in, come in, he's eating his supper," the voice said with impatient friendliness.

The traveller slipped from his horse and stepped toward the gate. It was suddenly thrown open and the girl rushed into his arms.

"Oh, you think you'll fool me again, but you can't.

I've been looking for you." She planted a kiss on his cheek and drew her arm through his. "I'm awfully glad to see you, Jim. What made you so late?"

The other sought to disengage himself, conscious that his face was flaming at this cordial but mistaken welcome.

"I'm not Jim—I'm the new preacher—Marvin Garner," he stammered.

"Jim quit your fooling. I am on to you this time. It was Capt. Lany before, now it's Parson Garner. No, you don't catch me twice with the same trick." She led him toward the house, plying him with questions. Marvin remained silent, imagining her discomfiture when they should come into the light.

A man stood waiting them in the doorway.

"Hello, Jim, how's things over at Retta?" he asked, stepping aside for them to enter.

"Oh, this ain't Jim—this is Parson Garner, whoever he is," said Marvin's companion, sarcastically. "Thinks he's awful sly slipping up on us this way." They entered the hall, and she turned to confront the culprit she had caught red-handed.

Then she screamed and fled precipitately.

Marvin was left facing her father.

"This is Mr. Grogan, I believe?" he began, offering his hand. "It seems I've been taken for Uncle Jim. I'm Marvin Garner, the new preacher sent to the Mission."

Mr. Grogan took the proffered hand gingerly, his face crinkling with enjoyment of the situation.

"Glad to see you, Brother Garner; have a chair. You'll have to excuse Ida; she's rather upset at her mistake. We hadn't heard if we were to get a preacher this year or not, and were not expecting you. We have just finished supper. Keep your seat, and I'll speak to my wife."

Marvin left alone, unconsciously put his finger tips to the spot where Miss Grogan had meant to kiss Uncle Jim. Presently Mrs. Grogan entered and made further explanation of his unusual reception. "Jim's such a tease," she said in a soft, pleasant voice. "Thinks it a great joke to ride up in the night and ask for lodging, pretending he's a stranger. Ida learned from the stage-driver that he was coming out to-day and thought she would get even with him. She's very sorry for her blunder——"

"It was quite natural," returned Marvin.

Later when he had finished his supper, Ida stepped into the doorway haltingly, and waited for her mother to introduce her. Then she came forward with a determined air and offered her hand.

"You'll pardon my rudeness, Brother Garner. I never dreamed that it could be anybody but Uncle Jim. Ma has told you how it came to happen?"

Then the incident was dropped. Soon afterward Mrs. Grogan excused herself. It suddenly struck

Marvin as odd that he should be in this home, surpassing in elegance and refinement any he had known during his incumbency at Whiterock, being entertained by a charming young lady, when he expected to be spending the night in a settler's hut or dugout. But when he confided his expectations to Miss Ida, he learned that they would have been realized had he sought hospitality at the home of any other member of his flock. Mr. Grogan was one of the few men of means living on the prairie, most of the large land owners and ranchers being non-resident.

Miss Ida had lately returned from a term at the Retta Female College, and still prided herself upon her accomplishments. She played and sang for her guest, and finally offered a portfolio of sketches and paintings for his approval.

"I'm sure these pictures are quite well done," Marvin assured her, examining them critically.

"To be honest with you," she explained; "I don't deserve credit for them. The fact is, my teacher touched them up considerably. I'm enlarging a Dutch landscape from an advertising card. I'll show it to you some time."

"I'd think you'd find the prairie about here a splendid subject?"

"Oh, I couldn't think of doing anything like that. I just copy, badly at that. I haven't any talent for original work, but I dearly love art."

"Miss Ida, I'm so glad you do, and it tempts me to let you into a little secret of mine," Marvin said impulsively, led into a confidence by his entertainer's evident appreciation of art. "I paint a little myself."

"Oh, you do—how nice. Then you'll help me?"

He could not draw back now, though he had a feeling of having blundered.

"I'm sure I'll be very glad to—if I can," he said.

A shadow came into Miss Ida's face.

"I—I don't think, though, father would approve if he knew. He thinks it a waste of time—my trying to paint. He says it's silly to be daubing fields and animals when you can look out the window any hour and see the real thing. But you can trust me."

The next day Marvin moved into the parsonage. It was a rude little boxed house of rough pine. There were two rooms above and two below, all of the same size, connected by a ladder-like stairway. It was little more than a mile from Mr. Grogan's, just over a swell of the prairie, and from his door the roofs of the houses could be seen on the sky like the dirty tents of travellers. The nearest settlement south of him was some five miles distant, and four miles to the north wound the sluggish Red River, the timber along its course hovering on the plain like a fringe of cloud. The view was colossal, and as Marvin stood before the door and swept the horizon, it was as if he had been set down upon an uninhabited world, he a lone dweller

on a brown solitude. It was the environment of which he had dreamed; he felt as if God had answered the unworded prayer of his heart. As he stood there at the close of the day, tired with the moving in, and watched the sun go down through fields of yellow radiance, he lifted his eyes toward the glory that opened to his view—prayed for power to put what he saw, what he felt, on canvas. God moved a tangible, personal presence in the vast glooming spaces, thrilled him.

“God, God,” he cried from the very depths of his soul.

CHAPTER II.

Four miles from Benvanue on the river, high on the second bank, above the overflow mark, there were clustered a dozen or so huts, known as Dugout Town. These were inhabited by squatters, peripatetic frontiersmen, who spent their lives drifting just in advance of the oncoming wave of civilization. Here Marvin often came and spent a day visiting among the people. Late one afternoon returning from this village, he descried Miss Ida moving afoot across the prairie toward Benvanue. She walked slowly, swinging an empty basket on her arm. At his approach she turned, a look of startled surprise on her face.

"Why, Brother Garner, how you frightened me."

He dismounted and walked beside her.

Her wide-brimmed hat had fallen coquetishly awry, and the wind flung her hair a black aureole about her face and neck. There was a fine bronze beneath the red of her cheeks, the vitality of health sparkled in her eyes, and, as Marvin watched her move knee deep in the rank grass, he thought of her as the embodiment of the spirit of the prairie. He suddenly conceived the idea of having her pose for him. He

would paint a picture and call it "The Spirit of the Prairie."

The sun was sinking low behind the divide. He stopped and studied her lithe form as it swung firmly against the yellow glow. The soft light gilded her like a statute done in gold.

"Miss Ida I want to paint you like that," he called. Then he told her of the idea that had come to him. She was flattered and entered heartily into his plans.

Some days later at a prearranged hour, she hastened across the stretch of pasture between her home and the parsonage. Coming to a spot that had been marked by the artist, she assumed a pose, in the details of which she had been instructed. Here she stood motionless, gazing into the luminous west. She at intervals moved about, picking the belated flowers that she found there, her eyes wandering furtively to the window where she knew the artist worked. Had a passerby seen her at these times he might have conjectured that some other reason than the faded blossoms and sunset led her to visit the spot; and this is exactly what did take place some weeks later. Mr. Grogan, on his way to a distant part of the ranch, upon coming to the top of the divide, espied the strange figure beyond staring skyward. He stopped and regarded the apparition curiously. In the costume of the Spirit of the Prairie he did not recognize his daughter. While he hesitated, he saw her turn

toward the window, then stoop and busy herself with something in the grass. He at once suspected a communication of some kind between the person within doors and the one acting so oddly without. He slipped into the grass, and from this point of vantage continued his observations. He was perplexed when the object of them presently resumed the statue-like attitude and fixity of gaze. But when, at the next interval of rest, the actor of the mystifying drama turned toward him, he perceived that it was Ida. For a moment he was puzzled. Then a black suspicion flashed through his mind. He rose from his concealment and strode toward her. "Ida, what are you doing here?—how strange you look."

"Oh," cried Ida, startled, fear in her eyes. She stood an instant regarding her father dubiously, her face crimson. "Why, pa, how you frightened me," she said. "I've been picking flowers that I knew grew hereabout. See," she went on hurriedly, holding up a few stalks of faded blossoms.

Marvin witnessed the little tragedy and was filled with a sudden apprehension. He threw down his brush and hastened below. This secrecy was unwise. If he must paint, he should do it openly. If wrong he should give it up; if right it was cowardly to humor the ignorance and prejudice of his people. The words of St. Paul came to him, "If meat make my brother to offend I will eat no more meat." Wasn't St.

Paul a time-server? Why did he not teach the people that it was not wrong to eat meat instead of compromising with their superstition?

But he was no longer in a mood to paint. He was almost tempted to make a vow never to touch canvas again. He could not go on in this way. Some evil would surely grow out of it. Other men might serve two masters, but he was not large enough, he must swear allegiance to one or the other. Saddling his horse, he started in a canter across the plain, and rode on and on, oblivious of time, distance, direction. When the mood passed, he realized that he had wandered miles from the village. The sun had gone down and night had fallen gloomily about him. From the elevation he could follow the leaden gleam of the river winding into impenetrable shadows. Presently this melted into black night. The face of the plain vanished. Overhead, a low curtain of cloud shut out the heavens. The wind swept through the grass in mournful dirge. A great sense of loneliness settled upon him, an undefinable unrest moved within him that he could not calm, could not fathom. He stared into the silent, obscure spaces bewildered, trackless, chartless, isolated, engulfed.

He still stood perplexed, knowing not which way to turn, when there broke upon the stillness the clatter of hoofs. He called lustily. The horseman came to a halting stop. "Hello, stranger," came from the

dark. Guided by the voice, Marvin soon joined the traveller. He was going to Benvenue for a doctor, and the horses now walked briskly in that direction.

"Been hearin' of you," began the stranger after he had learned Marvin's name; "an' they tell me you ain't no common cayuse of a word slinger, not meanin' no offense; an' I've been promisin' myself I'd go over some time an' hear the way you done it."

Marvin murmured that he would be glad to see him at his services. An interval of silence followed, then the stranger, with the feeling common to unsophisticated minds that religion is the only subject a preacher is interested in, began hesitatingly, but reverently:

"I ain't religus, Parson, but it ain't because I wouldn't like to be. An' I reckon a feller never tried harder to git it than yer's truly. Yes, I 'tended three camp-meetin's, han' runnin', an' I went to the mourner's bench every chanet I got, but it weren't no good. Somehow I couldn't ketch on to the trick of the thing, though I ain't blamin' nobody but myself. Everybody seemed to do their best. Parson Pertil would come an' kneel down by me an' put his arms lovin' roun' my neck, an' say, 'Dear Frien', can't you say, 'Here, Lord, I give myself away, 'tis all as I can do.'" An' then I'd say it an' keep sayin' it, an' runnin' over it in my min' till I could see the Lord hisself stan'nin' there afore me, his han's an' tender

brow a-droppin' blood, an' the sorrowful look on his face, an' I see myself kneelin' in the dust at his feet, wringin' my han's an' cryin', 'Tis all as I can do.' But somehow I couldn't git no religin.

"Then ol' Sister Durin, from town, who 'tends all the camp-meetin's an' lechineers fer her son that's jedge, she'd come 'long shakin' han's right an' left, an' sayin', 'I love you, an' my son loves you, an' I want to see you shoutin' happy. Oh, frien' don't never turn back.' But I noticed when she learned a feller didn't live in the county she weren't so lovin' to him no more, an' then kind of a hard lump 'ud come up in my throat an' I'd feel like I'd never git religin in the world.

"Then they'd come an' crowd on you with their feet an' arms an' cry into yer ears till you couldn't think, an' I thought shorely I'd smother to death. My eyes 'ud git that dry I couldn't force a tear, an' I'd feel I 'z shore lost.

"Wern't fer George Bridgeman, I guess I'd 'a' give up. Maybe you know him. He'z one of yer members, an' has a ranch over on Whichita. Well, he never was much to shout, but he'z one of the best fellers God ever made. When I landed yere broke, an' no credit an' no frien's, he stood fer me over at Grogan's, an' I ain't never forgot. Well, he come an' took my han' sof' like, an' says something sensible, an' 'fore I knowed it the tears come floodin' my eyes

an' I felt like risin' up an' fetchin' him a hug, rememberin' what he had done fer me. An' I'd pray the Lord to let me profess while George was roun', but he never did, an' I'm still onreligius."

Marvin made a non-committal remark, and, thus encouraged, he continued:

"There was one feller that made sech a queer mistake, I fergot where I was an' broke out into sech outlandish laughin' they thought I'd come through. It was one night—the lights weren't nothin' to speak of—an' he took me fer a frien' of his. It was a pity how that feller banded me in the back. Says he, 'Ol' pard, can't you shell down the corn. Tell the Lord how mean you've been, an' you want him to save you. He'll do it. You ain't no worsen'n me, an' you know I got drunk an' cust an' shot up things. An' you remember ol' nigger Dick as was in our way when we wanted to bran' them yearlin's, you know which ones. Well, I'm done fergive fer it all. I feel as innercent as a new born babe, an' if Dick was back agin I could fergive an' love 'im. Jest throw yerself on the promises. Say, pard, talk to me—how you feelin'?' I remained silent as death. Then he says, 'Bill, ol' boy, can't you round her up? Jest knuckle down an' give way to yer feelin's.' I didn't dare open my mouth, an' seems like he begin to smell a mouse. Then he got quiet an' I could feel him peerin' closer, an' he whispered sorter 'furd like, an' breathin' hard, 'Lord

have mercy.' When I peeked under my elbow, he'd done gone. Couple of fellers was missin' from the range after that an' I knowed who shot nigger Dick.

"No, I guess there ain't no religin fer me," he rattled on. "I've done my best. They'd say, 'Let every breath be a prayer, an' I prayed an' prayed till I thought shorely the Lord'ud give me religin to git shet of me. Then I'd clear run out an' I'd jest lay there an' lisen to the brothers an' sisters till I knowed their prayers by heart, an' when Brother Brooks said it would do me good if I'd pray aloud, I turned loose on his. Well, there was some surprised folks, an' they didn't call on me to pray no more. But I done my best, an' I ain't blamin' nobody," he said with cheerful hopelessness.

A turn in the road brought into view a twinkling light far on the horizon.

"You see that light yonder?" he asked. "Well, that's Col. Whaley's. Though whether he's a colonel er not, er his name's Whaley er not, is more'n I can say. Now, he's one of yer straight out an' out onreligus fellers. Cusses religin till you'd think if there's a God he'd shore be struck down fer blasphemy."

Marvin expressed an interest in the blasphemous colonel, and his companion continued:

"They do say if he had jestice he'd be wearin' stripes. But a feller pays fer his meanness one way er another, an' I guess if the Lord makes that kind

of a man he's able to give him his proper punishment without my interferin'. So if you ast me if it's true what everybody thinks 'bout Whaley, I'd say it's none of my bizness. Fer as my dealin's with him goes, he's been white; an' that's more'n you can say fer every one that makes a great bluff of vartue an' religin. But 'tween us, Parson, that man's had 'speriences. If you ever see him, jest look into his eyes. It makes you sad to look at that man when he thinks nobody's noticin'. If he's done wicked, I guess he's payin' fer it. You ain't hurd? Well, it was like this. He moved onto the river yere afore the Indians quit debredatin' the country, opened up a big ranch an' always seemed to have no end of money, though where it come from nobody never knowed. He wouldn't have nothin' to do with nobody, spent his time with his books—got piles of 'em, like a lawyer. 'Casionally he goes off somewhere fer months, nobody knows where, an' he always comes back lookin' like he's jest gittin' up from a spell of sickness.

“Well, long time ago, so they say, one of his cowboys went back East somewhere an' married a young wife. She was one of them fine lookin' creatures with bewitchin' ways, an' wimin bein' a pretty scarce article on the prairie, she soon had everybody's head turned. Wasn't long afore they noticed things weren't runnin' exactly civilized up at the ranch. Whaley 'ud send off Purdy, that was her husband's name, an' then

he'd have her up to his house. Nacherly folks went to talkin' an' soon the carryin' on reached Purdy. He got furious mad an' quarrelled with Whaley. Soon after, as the sayin' goes, he waked up one mornin' an' foun' hisself dead. Someone shot him while he's 'sleep. Suspicion pointed to his wife, an' she was 'rested an' tried, but Whaley stood by her, an' she come clear. That's what circulates on the prairie."

They had by this time entered the sleeping village.

"I hope I ain't bored you?" said Marvin's loquacious guide, turning toward him. "Wife says if I could use my han's like I do my tongue, I'd shore git rich. My name is Bud Black, an' if you happen over on the river, come an' see me—my wife's religus," and with a curt good-night, he clattered down the street.

CHAPTER III.

Ida kept no more the artistic tryst. But Marvin mastered the passing compunction and went on with his painting. "The Spirit of the Prairie" had reached that stage where he could carry it on to its completion unaided. He worked unflaggingly, and so completely were the spare hours of the day taken up with his brush that he often sat far into the night pouring over the books that he yet must be examined on for orders. Occasionally he was conscious of a vague conviction that it was a useless waste of time, but he conscientiously held himself to it.

One night while thus engaged, his feeble light streaming out into the dark, the only landmark on the shrouded prairie, the faint thud of distant hoof beats broke on his ear. He sat up, and, his hand as a marker on the open page, he looked out the window and listened. Nearer and nearer came the horseman, and he found himself tracing the course of the clattering feet, till at length they stopped at his gate.

"Hello," cried someone from the dark.

Marvin threw open the door.

"What is it?" he called.

"Colonel Whaley is dying and wants you to come. I brought a horse—he says you must hurry."

Marvin threw on his top coat and hat and was soon plunging through the night after his reckless guide. As he sped along, he wondered why the Colonel had sent for him, what word of comfort he could offer to one who had led the life imputed to the now dying man. He was awed at the thought of a soul facing eternity calling to him for help. He felt impotent, what ministration of his could change that life? what promise did revelation hold out to the unbeliever? He was sorely perplexed. But the Colonel made the dreaded duty easier for him than he had hoped.

When he entered the room where he lay, he found the sick man in a stupor, his face haggard and drawn, breathing heavily. Purdy's widow sat at his feet, her face buried in the quilts.

The noise of the entry aroused him. He opened his bloodshot eyes and stared into the visitor's face.

"You came?" he said calmly. "I thought you would. Not that you care a damn for me, but because it is a part of your humbugging business."

He dismissed the woman and, after silently regarding the preacher for a space, suddenly asked:

"Now, what do you think you can do for me?"

He waited for Marvin's reply.

"As you sent for me, I supposed you thought I

might help you in some way. I'll be glad to do anything in my power."

"Do you believe in God?"

"Yes."

"Do you think he answers prayer?"

"If offered in faith—according to His will——"

"Oh, damn it, the old song—the old crawling out place. You simpleton, don't you know with those 'ifs' I could pray to that crazy clock, my old hat, that black tomcat, with just the same hope of an answer? If it's His will? Isn't it His will to save the world? Didn't He let His Son be murdered for that purpose? For nineteen centuries ten millions of deluded fools have been praying for the same thing and the damned old world is going to the same old hell just the same. You can't, to save your life, put your finger on a single soul, from Adam to damned old Whaley, and convince anybody but an idiot whether he's saved or not. And here you go on droning your prayers and preaching your tommy-rot till doomsday. Now, if you want to try a prayer of faith, according to His will, pray that I be free of this pain in ten minutes. That will give you time enough to reach headquarters. No, you wouldn't pray any such prayer. Well, then, pray, do your damndest, that I be dead as a mummy in ten minutes. Your God ought to find that an easy one—but He can't answer it. He can't kill a wretched old blasphemer, that defies Him, till this body plays

out, till Nature gets ready. No, He never heard a prayer and He never will hear one. He's as impersonal as the air and sunshine. What you call God is a superstition of the soul—there's no God but Nature's laws, and they will no more heed your sniffing than the cry of the cayote caught in a trap.

"Ten minutes for your God to stop this pain or put me out of my misery for quits. Take your choice. Damn your God!"

He broke into a sarcastic laugh. Then calming himself, he went on:

"You wouldn't try it? Well, I don't blame you, and I beg your pardon. I was over to hear your first sermon; I always go over to size up the new men. Usually that is the end of it. Sometimes a parson rounds me up before I can get away and gives me a regular song and dance of a welcome. Then he learns of my unsavory reputation and doesn't know me the next time we meet. You fellows seem to have a fancy for respectable sinners. You preach that Christ came to save the lost, but you don't want them too damned lost. But I liked your looks. You've got brains, if you are throwing them away——"

He sank back on the pillows, seized with a paroxysm of pain. He closed his eyes and was silent.

"Why don't you tell them the truth?" he said, after a little, starting up. "Instead of preaching hell and brimstone hereafter, tell them it is here in this life.

Oh, the fools! They lead their narrow, selfish lives; make the most of their animal impulses, then when all the vitality is squeezed out of the flesh, in their impotency they turn to God, thinking a few tears, a prayer, a foolish ceremony will win them an eternal glory. The fools, crying to Christ who could not save himself. He didn't die for men, but because of men. To make Him forgive sins, to save men from a hell hereafter, is to make Him a fraud and a failure; to teach that He saves men from their worst selves here, by seeking to live as He lived, is to make Him the best and greatest man the world has ever known. But He condemned the hypocritical lives of men and they killed Him. Go tell men that they save or damn themselves as they live or refuse to live like Christ—throw your creeds, dogmas, mechanical formulas, to the devil, the author of them. I know what hell is—I've been in it thirty years; and no Christ, no God, no devil, no power on earth or in heaven, can get me out. But I'll not preach—that's more in your line," he broke off with a bitter smile, a pathetic gloom settling in his eyes.

"I guess you wonder why I sent for you?" he said after an instant. "Because you are a man; because you had a kindly face; because you are trying to be honest. It's a man I want, not a God. It's human sympathy the soul cries out for, not a vague, impersonal something called God. The reason men made

a God of Christ was because He was so human; because of His gentleness, His mercy, His love. I could cry out to Christ, but He's dead, dead as Socrates and Moses; He can't hear me, can't talk to me. I refused to live the life He taught, rejected all He might have been to me—what I want now is human companionship, sympathy, the touch of a live hand, the look of an honest eye, the sound of a sincere voice."

Marvin grasped the extended hand in silence.

"Thank you, thank you," he said, his voice growing feeble. "I'm a miserable old sinner—hell rages in my bosom. But I once was as young as you—had health, friends, wealth, brains, prospects. I threw them all away—and now I lie dying, a damned, lost soul, the only power left me the power to feel remorse. Don't tell me there is no hell—hell?—which way I turn is hell — myself am hell — damned, lost soul, damned, lost soul!" His voice sank to a whisper, his eyes rolled vacantly, he seemed to be losing consciousness when he suddenly flared up, looking into the other's face:

"Young man, don't spoil your life—don't spoil your life."

Marvin sat for a long time in the silent room, holding the old man's hand, listening to the ticking of the clock, the purring of the black cat, his heart full of pity for the miserable soul he could not help. At last

he rose and crept from the room. He paused in the door and glanced back to the bed—the gaunt form and contorted face haunted him for days.

The next day he began a new picture—"The Lost Soul."

CHAPTER IV.

A luminous day late in December, Marvin rode across the dun stretches, his sketch book in hand. It was one of those balmy, delusive days, common to that section, that makes the uninitiated think Spring has prematurely arrived, but to the old timer and weather-wise only a presage and warning of the "norther" that is on the way. As Marvin's eyes followed the white tortuous gleam of the river, he saw rising from the earth a greenish-black curtain that spread rapidly over the west, as if unfolded by some unseen mechanism. Before he was aware the heavens in that direction were blotted out. An ominous silence settled on the plain; not a grass blade stirred. The air became dense, oppressive. It was as if Nature in awe of some unusual upheaval of her own making, had held her breath. One was filled with a sense of impending danger. The cattle grazing on the uplands lifted their heads and, sniffing the air, sped in a panic toward the breaks of the river. In the stampede, mother and offspring became separated and the stillness was soon alive with insistent, distracted bellowing; forlorn, terror-stricken bleating. Then there

were a few premonitory breaths of air belched from out the sky, and the storm broke in all its fury, sweeping across the prairie like a thousand keen-edged knives, chilling to the marrow every living thing.

Marvin turned and galloped toward home. He had not gone far when a feeble cry struck his ear. He stopped and listened. On a bluff his eye picked out the skeleton outline of a hapless cow that had stuck fast in the rocks. Below was a month's old calf that made fruitless efforts to reach her side.

"Oh, the cruelty of Nature," burst involuntary from his lips, as he sprang to the ground and hurried to the rescue. As he exerted himself to this end, he heard his name called, as if from the spaces of heaven.

"Brother Garner, you better let the cow be and look out for yourself—lots of them die in these northers."

He stood up and confronted Ida. She was sitting on her pony at the top of the butte watching his maneuvers. The wind played havoc with her hair and it floated about her face like stranded sea weeds. He stared at her a moment as if she were an apparition.

"Miss Ida, what are you doing on the prairie in this storm?"

She explained that she was returning from Dugout Town when she saw him, and, thinking he had lost the way, followed. "They wouldn't likely make it

through the winter, anyway," she said, referring again to the helpless animals.

"But how heartless to leave them to freeze this way," he replied, renewing his efforts.

"Oh, we never think of that. It's cheaper to let a few hundred starve and freeze than to feed and shelter them. In the spring the prairie will be dotted with their bones."

Marvin worked on obliviously. Seeing that he persisted in his purpose, she dismounted and went to his assistance. Between them they succeeded in freeing the cow. She went tottering down the declivity to her offspring. Turning her back to the fierce wind she sought to shield it between her legs, pressing her neck against its quivering side in further effort to protect it. Thus bent against the storm, weak till she could scarcely stand, the cold cutting into every nerve, the mother instinct made the dumb animal, in Marvin's thoughts, heroically human. As he looked at the trembling bits of life, utterly defenseless against the pitiless elements, the thoughts came to his mind that had come to him months before as he knelt in a wood and prayed for the salvation of fifty souls, the prayer and praise of a multitude breaking on his ear. Then the question was, does God hear the cry only of the strong and great? Do the weak things that creep and crawl have no voice to reach his ear? Now it was the same question, and

with it the same old doubt that he sought vainly to stifle. God does not help the weak; therefore he does not help the strong. Perhaps Col. Whaley was right—God is impersonal—another name for the inevitable, relentless laws of Nature.

The cow, under the lash of the wind, lifted her head, her dumb, pathetic eyes, staring a mute appeal to the sky.

"Why, I do believe she's praying," said Ida, touched by the suggestive attitude. Marvin, following his thoughts, answered: "And no one to hear her prayers but us, and we powerless to heed them."

It became suddenly darker and a white mist filled the air. Ida sprang to her horse. "We must get out of this, Brother Garner. It's going to snow, and if we get lost out here——"

"There'll be no one to answer our prayers."

He still thought of the cow and calf that he knew to-morrow would lay stark beneath the snow.

They galloped across the prairie. The storm grew in violence, and the landmarks rapidly disappeared. Marvin grasped Ida's bridle that they might not become separated. At length they came to a gate that opened into a wide lane that led to Benvenue. When they came in sight of the village, night had settled and the blizzard continued to increase in violence. It was with difficulty that they urged their horses against the blinding sweep of snow, and as last they

were forced to get down and walk. Reaching the parsonage, Ida suggested that they go in and wait till the storm abated.

"But won't your parents be uneasy?" Marvin asked, not liking the idea. "I think we can make it."

"No; they'll think I'm at Dugout Town. I spend the night there sometimes—I'm nearly frozen—and you promised I might see 'The Spirit of the Prairie.'"

They had reached the gate and he threw it open. Ida entered, not waiting for further invitation. He was conscious that in thus yielding he had acted unwisely, but he could not summon a refusal that would not sound harsh. He led the horses to shelter, and when he entered the parsonage, he found Ida on her knees in front of the box stove, kindling the fire.

"You see I'm making myself at home," she said, looking up at him with glowing eyes. He knelt beside her and they soon had the fire going briskly as they fed it with driftwood from the river and white-pine boards from the store. Night had settled thick without and the room was in darkness save where the open door of the roaring stove flooded the end of the room with a fan-shaped radiance. In the heart of this they sat, their arms touching as they leaned forward, gazing into the popping fire. Marvin had a passing sense of pleasure at this unexpected companionship in his bleak quarters. He did not draw

himself away, and they sat for some time in silence.

"Ain't it jolly?" Ida said presently, turning and looking into his eyes. "It's most like camping out—and I do like that. You must go with us on our trips next spring."

Marvin expressed his pleasure at the prospect.

"Now, ain't you glad I stopped?"

"It wouldn't be polite to say no," he returned, evasively.

"No, don't you dare to or I'll plunge out in the blizzard and lose myself."

"Please don't, Miss Ida," he said, seizing her arm as if to restrain her.

She thrust to the stove door.

"Oh, how dark. Get a light quick," she cried, clinging to him as she rose to her feet.

When a light was struck, she stood an instant surveying the room.

"Where are the pictures?" she asked, disappointed.

Marvin climbed to the attic and returned with "The Spirit of the Prairie." When it had been arranged so that the light fell on it to the best advantage, Ida, though not a competent judge, burst into exclamations of approval.

"Why, Brother Garner, you are an artist—and you've made me look beautiful."

"I had a beautiful subject."

"Oh, thanks," she returned, glancing up quickly,

her eyes shining. "Now show me the others, please."

He brought them down one at a time and placed them in odd corners about the room.

Ida stared open-eyed.

"Did you paint them all—that one?" she asked, nodding her head shyly toward a nude.

"Yes; that's a symbolical treatment of Spring."

"Well, I wouldn't have dreamed that a preacher painted it."

Marvin appeared not to hear. "Here is one I call 'The Lost Soul.'"

"What an awfully horrid face—why, Brother Garner, is that Col. Whaley?"

When at last they thought of the hour, it was past midnight. Marvin opened the door and peered out. The slit of light lit up a grey wall of madly whirling snow; the wind roared across the prairie like an enraged demon. He slammed to the door, and they stood staring at each other blankly.

"Miss Ida, you can't go home to-night."

"Oh, I must, I must," she cried, starting up in alarm. But when they had discussed the matter, they knew that it was not possible.

Ida resigned herself to the inevitable. She became unseemly cheerful and Marvin thought he detected a suppressed elation at the outcome of their adventure.

"This is just my luck," she began, presently, reclining in an easy position in the rocker, her arms

crossed above her head. "I was camping with the Browns, of Retta, one spring, and Charley, an awfully cute chap, and myself were riding on the prairie one afternoon when there came up a thunder shower. We knew we'd get drenched before we could make the camp, so we galloped about looking for some kind of shelter. We found an old dugout the cowboys had abandoned, and hurried into it. The roof had caved in and we had to sit all doubled up. When it began to rain it was almost dark as night, and water trickled through and ran down our backs. Charley kept holding my hand and asking me if I was afraid. Now, wasn't that silly? But Charley is a great flirt. He does all the girls that way and we don't mind him. Well, there we sat holding each other's hands in the dark—think of it—till the water rose to the tops of our shoes. Then we had to get out. It was still pouring down and by the time we reached camp we looked like drowned rats. This is a regular snap. Now, ain't it cozy?"

Marvin was uncomfortable, uneasy. Somehow he was filled with a secret dread.

"Well, we are at least dry and warm," he said, glancing about the room. His eyes fell on the bare spot where had rested the supply of wood for the night. "Why, Miss Ida," he cried, in alarm, "we've used all our fuel."

"Now, that's too bad."

In fact the fire had begun to burn low. The stove that a few minutes ago glowed red, had faded to its wonted color of dirty brown. The house was rudely constructed and through crevices about the door and windows a fine white powder sifted into the room. As it grew colder they pulled their chairs closer and closer to the stove, until at last they huddled against its sides. Then the fire burned itself out. The temperature dropped to freezing.

"Hadn't I better try to get you home, Miss Ida?" Marvin asked, tentatively.

"Oh, they wouldn't expect me now."

He went to the door and, opening it a fraction, peered out. The blizzard still raged.

"Then you had better go to bed; you'll freeze if you don't."

"But what will you do?" she asked, anxiously.

"Oh, I'll go upstairs and manage somehow. I can keep moving till morning."

"But I'll be frightened to death alone in the dark."

"You can keep the light burning."

"Oh, I'd see all kinds of horrible things staring at me through the window."

"But we'll freeze sitting here," he insisted.

"Yes, we will," she admitted.

He took the key from the door opening onto the stairway. "Here, Miss Ida, you must go to bed. Lock the door when I go up, and blow out the light.

There's nothing to fear. No one would venture out such a night as this."

"No, no, I can't," she cried, pushing the key from her. "I'm afraid to be down here alone." She bent forward, her face in her hands. "Oh, what shall we do, Brother Garner? I didn't think it would be like this—and we were having such a jolly visit——"

"That's the question," he returned, perplexed. "What shall we do?" It was with difficulty that he restrained a growing irritation. He saw now how foolish he had been in yielding to her wish.

"Miss Ida, you must go to bed. It's out of the question your sitting up longer," he said firmly.

"Oh, please don't scold," she said humbly; "I'm awfully sorry it's—it's turned out this way."

"I'm not scolding," he insisted, relenting a little; "but you mustn't freeze."

"Nor you," she said solicitously. She stood up suddenly, her eyes bright with the purpose that moved her. "I know a plan," she ventured timidly; "if you wouldn't mind—we—we could sit close together on the bed—and wrap up with the quilts—I've done that camping out——"

Marvin regarded her thoughtfully. "No," he answered.

Ida's head drooped forlornly, her eyes on the floor. There was a troubled intake of breath. Marvin's thoughts were sadly confused. His rejection of her

proposal seemed to put a questionable color upon it; to accept it seemed foolish. Perhaps a trial would convince her of this.

"We might try your plan, Miss Ida—we must do something."

"No, you don't think it proper," she mumbled, not looking up.

"Proper or not—we mustn't freeze."

"Well, come on, then," she said walking to the bed. "I'm chilled to the bone."

She lifted the covers so that they could be easily drawn about their shoulders, and, sitting down, waited for him to take his place beside her. This he did. They tucked in the quilts, their arms interlaced as they held them in place. It was if they sat in close embrace. The warmth of their bodies, thus husbanded, they were soon in a comfortable glow. They could feel the beating of each other's hearts, and their breathing brought their bosoms together in gentle, recurrent pressures. They sat for some time in silence. Marvin's imagination was keenly active. He was thinking how awkward it would be if a citizen of Benvenue should glance through the window at this juncture, and how difficult an explanation.

Ida seemed to sense her companion's uneasiness and sat silently staring at the curtainless window. Her buoyant spirit had forsaken her. An hour

dragged by, and Marvin found the strained position already growing extremely irksome. One of his legs had gone to sleep, but he dared not move for fear of disarranging the quilts and letting in the cold. He could feel Ida's body sagging with increasing weight against his. It was with a painful effort that he maintained his upright position. Their breath had frozen a crust of ice on the covers; beneath the door and windows were heaps of snow, and the wind shrieked with growing fury about the rude structure and swept through the room with an icy menace.

"I'm getting awfully tired," said Ida at last. "Why can't we lay back on the bed and rest?"

"Here goes," said Marvin, desperately. They sank back simultaneously and found themselves in each other's arms, their faces touching.

Another hour had passed, when Marvin's anxious ear caught the faint crunching of snow, and he could trace the course of feet battling the storm.

"What is it?" Ida whispered, fearfully.

"Cow or horse," Marvin answered, reassuringly, but trembling with a sense of impending danger.

The window was suddenly rattled violently. Marvin lay breathless; he seemed powerless to move. Then the pounding grew insistent, and a hoarse voice cried threateningly: "Open up, open up."

Marvin sprang from the bed, tossing the quilts over Ida, scarcely realizing that he did so, or the motive

prompting the act. "Come in, come in," he called, stepping into the middle of the room. The door was flung wide and Grogan, snow-encrusted, wild-eyed, stood blinking into his face.

"Brother Grogan," Marvin gasped.

"Where's Ida?" the other asked, glancing about the room. "Hutton said he saw you together on the prairie just before the storm broke."

Marvin stood like one suddenly struck dumb, his mind running on ahead searching his brain for the most fitting explanation, that he now saw was inevitable.

"Where's Ida?" Grogan demanded fiercely, stepping nearer.

"She's—here," Marvin stammered. "We got caught in the blizzard—we——"

"Ida," he called, striding to the bed.

His daughter rose from the quilts and stood trembling before him, her dishevelled hair falling about her shoulders and hiding her downcast eyes.

"Ida, why didn't you come home?—what are you doing here?" he thundered, grasping her arm roughly.

"Oh, pa, it was blowing terribly—and we stopped—we thought it wouldn't last long—but it got harder and harder—we couldn't get home——"

Grogan glared a moment at the drooping, shivering figure; glanced to the bed where she had lain, at the fireless stove, at the pictures scattered about the

room, then, throwing the wraps he carried about her, pushed her into the storm. He did not look back, nor did he turn to close the door.

Marvin stood some minutes, staring into the wild night at the point where they disappeared, the snow whirling about him and settling down thick on his clothes. Mechanically he moved to the door, shut it. He glanced about the room in a dazed, unseeing way, blew out the light and crawled into bed. He was conscious of a numbing pain in his breast as if a heavy weight had been cast upon him.

CHAPTER V.

When Marvin woke the next morning, a blinding glare of light streamed through the uncurtained window. He threw on his overcoat and stepped out into the open. A silent world of white lay beneath the eye; lifted against the clear sky a scintillating radiance. It was as if he gazed on a field of alabaster strewn with powdered diamonds. From the crystalline vaults a new-faced sun glowed an orb of molten gold. He stood dumb before the miracle of color, his senses tingling with the keenest delight. The incidents of the night came to him as the unrealities of a dream. But there was present an uneasy premonition of threatening disaster, and that it would work some radical change in his life. His mood fluctuated from deepest gloom to exultant buoyancy. When he thought of his mother he was sad almost to despair; when he contemplated a release from the yoke of his bondage he laughed aloud with joy.

But the day passed and nothing transpired to justify his presentiments; and as he began to go over the situation he felt that his fears were ill-founded. Grogan could take no step to injure him that would

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not compromise his daughter. She, it was, who would suffer the most. He imagined her keen humiliation under her father's censure and condemnation and resolved at the earliest opportunity to see him and take all the blame for the night's adventure upon himself. But the weather held him a prisoner for some days, then the unhappy episode faded to an unpleasant memory as he again became absorbed in his work.

He sat one day, some weeks later, before his easel so intent upon his work that he was scarcely conscious of his own existence, when a loud rapping brought him in alarm to his feet. His palette and brush still in his hand, he opened the door. A half-dozen grizzly, weather-beaten faces were lifted to him from the steps.

"Come in, come in," he said cordially. The men filed in, their eyes on the floor, touching gingerly Marvin's proffered hand, as he greeted each one by name. There were only two chairs in the room and these Marvin brought forward. Fulton, his official from Big Bend, plumped down in the rocker with an air of proprietorship; his tanned face bristled with a black, brush-like beard, and as he turned his sunken, beady eyes furtively toward Marvin, his head was not unlike that of some shaggy animal. Grogan seated himself in the cane-bottomed chair that the artist had just pushed back from the easel. Marvin

turned to remove some things from the bed so that it might be pressed into service as a settee. When he faced about, he found his visitors staring open-eyed upon the nude figure of "Spring." There was a painful silence, during which he glanced from face to face inquiringly. A month ago these men regarded him with admiration little short of reverence; his word was law, his influence dominating. To them he was an idol. Because of him they had become hero worshippers. Now, he knew they condemned him unheard.

"Whar'd that come from?" asked Fulton, pointing to the offending picture.

Marvin recognized that any attempt toward conciliation would be futile in the presence of the incriminating evidence of his guilt. And though he tried to smother it, deep in his soul there glowed a hope that the action of these men would give him an excuse to break with his ill-advised career. He stepped to the picture and turned it to a better light.

"That is some of my work."

"Do you mean to say, Brother Garner, that you made that?" asked Fulton, incredulously.

"Yes; I painted it."

"I swan," blurted Fulton.

The men glanced at each other sheepishly, their eyes flashing back to the nude as if irresistibly under its spell.

"Sit down, men, an' let's git to bizness," commanded Fulton.

The men silently arranged themselves along the edge of the bed.

"Brother Garner, I guess you know what we come yere fer?" said Fulton, with business-like directness.

"No; I'm not sure that I do."

"Well, it's them pichers. When I herd it goin' roun' the prairie that you'z puttin' in yer time makin' pichers of naked wimin, I said it weren't so, but seein' is believin', an' you don't deny makin' 'em?"

"I rather think I'm proud I can do it," returned Marvin, with calm indifference.

"Well, I'd a-never believed a man that can preach the powerful sermons as you do would 'a' 'loud naked wimin in his house, much less to 'a' made 'em, an' havin' 'em where they'd stare you in the face every minit of the day, rousin' the flesh. It 'ud make a ol' man like me lose his religin, an' how you've got a spark of grace in yer heart after makin' that creature's more'n I can tell. The thoughts you must 'a' had in yer head to 'a' done it. I've been married twenty year an' never afore have I seen a woman in all her wicked nakedness like you've made that one. Don't seem reasonable that a man who can draw tears from yer eyes could find room in his heart for images of the scarlet woman. It's onreasonable. I swan,

if I hadn't heard you preach, I'd swear you'd missed yer callin', though why the good God gives men power to do sech wicked work is more'n I can guess. Makes me feel like the way I do when I pass the Red Lights over to Retta."

The men still stared at the helpless picture. A spell of fascinated embarrassment seemed to hold them. Fulton and Grogan alone maintained an outward show of composure. The former leaned back in the rocker and let his black beard drop on his bosom in judicial poise. He turned his eyes on Marvin as if he had been some strange, mysterious animal he could not fathom.

"Brother Garner, there ain't no use beatin' roun' the bush—the fact is, knowin' what we do, we wouldn't like to hear you preach no more. We owe it to our wimin an' children to withdraw our financial an' moral support. We can't ast you to leave, though it might be the best thing you could do; but we herewith notify you that we'll prefer charges of immorality agin you at the nex' quarterly conference. That's what we decided on up at Grogan's store if we found the reports 'bout the naked woman was true—an' you ain't denied nothin'."

"But I do deny being guilty of immorality of any kind," Marvin said, emphatically.

"Well, you know what the Scripchers says 'bout lookin' on wimin an' so forth, an' I can't see, after

havin' them naked images in yer min' an' 'fore yer eyes, as it would be any worse to 'a' had 'em in yer arms. What you want to do, Brother Marvin, is to marry. A few weeks of married life 'ud git them images of the scarlet woman outen yer 'magination. Nothin'll bring yer passions an' 'cupiscences to their senses, as the Bible says, like a woman of yer own. You know St. Paul says, 'better marry than burn,' an' that's the text you want to put in practice. Ain't I 'bout right, men?" The men pulled their eyes off the nude an instant and nodded approval.

"Well, men, I reckon that's 'bout all we've got to say," said Fulton, rising. "I must be goin'."

Marvin held open the door and the men filed out, bobbing their heads and mumbling as they passed. He closed the door and sat down to think the new situation over, when there was a feeble knock. "Come in," Marvin called.

Brown, of Yellow Prairie, slipped quietly in. He had forgotten a package. When the artist found it and placed it in his hand, he still stood hesitating, regarding the other in perplexity.

"Brother Garner, I'm awful sorry," he began at last. "I—I want you to know I don't believe you meant no wrong. An'—an'—I understan' them pichers. But I'm feurd Grogan's goin' to make it awful hard fer you, but it won't do no good to say nothin'. Maybe the Elder can straighten out things.

I'm awful sorry—good-bye.” He extended his hand and giving Marvin’s an awkward but hearty grasp, hurried out.

Marvin was dumb. Tears sprang unbidden to his eyes. A moment before he could have defied the world, fought the world—now he felt himself weak, unnerved at the sound of a sympathetic word. He threw himself on the bed and groaned aloud.

“Oh, God, what have I done—what made you let me do it?”

CHAPTER VI.

An April day lay bright, warm, illusive on the prairie. Marvin moved industriously about the room packing his few belongings for the departure on the morrow. From time to time he paused and looked out the window on the blue-green world. At last he picked up his hat and went out, swinging along briskly—he would have one more day in the open. He bared his head to the sunshine and soft breath of Spring that rippled in the white spaces; and his eyes on the young world, every care and hope dropped from his mental horizon. As he looked into the blue ocean above that mothered the green ocean below, visions of the vast silent life that moved mysteriously on the bosom of the one, swept the face of the other, filled his imagination—the unseen, unheard comedies and tragedies that played their unending round beneath the sun and stars, in calm and storm. He threw himself on his back and gazed into the fathomless spaces; let his eyes wander over the infinite stretches of green and blue and gold. He thrilled with a mystical exaltation; felt himself akin to the warm earth, the blue sky, the tilting grass, the pas-

sionate hawk that screamed in the heavens, the glowing cloud—the vital essence that moved in it all—to dream, to think, to aspire, to look toward God, to see God, to feel one's self a god! He was intoxicated with a tremulous uplift of soul.

Then his eyes chanced to rest on a grey-bearded head that slowly rose from the green bank. As he looked, there followed the stooped outline of an old man leaning on a staff—the figure of Father Time—a clear-cut cameo against the blue of the sky. He gazed at the apparition as a creature of a dream. But as it hobbled forward, he recognized Colonel Whaley. That miserable old pessimist had not died as he had hoped, and as Marvin had expected. Marvin rose and greeted him.

“Damn you, don't you know you are liable for trespass?” the Colonel blurted in an emotionless bark, his face like a tragic mask. “I'll have no renegade preacher, obscene dauber, on my land.”

Marvin looked at him in bewilderment. He had felt a great pity for the wretched old sinner; had been touched by his remorse, but surely he was lost to all human feeling.

“I'm sorry, Colonel, but I did not know I had wandered onto your premises.”

“Ha, ha,” cackled Whaley, in a mirthless voice. “Oh, damn you, Garner, I'm glad to see you. And you might just as well prayed for me, after all—

you might have had an answered prayer to your credit."

"I'm glad—you—are out," stammered Marvin.

"And I'm glad you are out—damn 'em—the fools. I'd have come over to see you, but I knew they'd hold it against you. But, damn 'em, they don't know no better, and why waste words on 'em. But it's the best thing that could have happened. You made a mistake. You would never have been contented to play the God for three hundred a year. You'll be happier daubing your pictures and starving. There's no lower hell to which a man can sink than self-contempt, and in the end you would have come to that. If Christ, who has almost been lost to the world beneath the dogmas and superstitions heaped upon Him, taught one thing worth while, it was to be true to one's self. He gave humanity what He alone could give and it killed Him for it; you have dared to do what you were created to do, and you find yourself condemned. But be true to yourself; make the most of your instincts—your heaven or hell depends upon that. You know what you want to do, do it, though it bring you a crown of thorns, a cross between thieves.

"No, don't try to answer me," he broke off, as Marvin essayed to speak. "We won't argue. Remember what I say or forget it, Whaley'll never know.

As the Colonel talked, Marvin looked into his face,

every line of which depicted suffering, remorse of soul, and the kindly, peaceful face of his mother rose before him. He found himself wondering if the difference in their lives could be accounted for in their differing attitudes toward God. Did the experiences of life give color to the character of one's God? or did the character one gave to his God color his life? If Whaley's belief made him the miserable creature he beheld, how infinitely better to hold to the superstitions of his mother.

The Colonel inquired further of Marvin's troubles, rumors of which he had heard. He sat down on the ground close to his side, leaning upon his stick; his grey beard dropped to his hands, his eyes resting on a lone peak that upreared on the white distance. He said nothing till Marvin had ceased speaking, then he turned and looked him over as if moved to new interest.

"May I see your pictures?" he asked. "I'm too old to be corrupted by them," he added, with expressionless irony.

"I've just been packing," said Marvin, when they reached the parsonage. His pictures were heaped on the bed and he lifted the top one and held it to the light. It was one of the last painted—a large canvas of a blizzard-swept plain. So realistic was it, one could almost hear the swish of the wind, feel the touch of cold. In the foreground, seen through the

swirling snow, stood the gaunt form of a cow with lifted head, a pathetic agony in her eyes. Between her legs she protected a dying calf. Whaley sat and gazed a long time with growing amazement.

"Damn, you, Garner, you're a genius," he blurted presently; "Why didn't you tell me you could do this?"

Marvin murmured some words of thanks, as he thrilled with the sincere, spontaneous praise. He put down "God in the Blizzard," as the picture was called, and took up another. It was a vast, shadow-wrapt plain; the limitless stretches melting into black voids. Far on the eastern horizon burned a feeble star. With his back to this only guiding ray, a gaunt, stooped form, his hands clasped about his eyes, staggered, as if under a burden, toward the abyss. The attitude was instinctive of hopelessness, despair.

Whaley leaned forward, his eyes staring, his mask-like face breaking into lines of wonder. "Why, damn you, you've put me in your picture. You scoundrel, to take advantage of a dying old man. The idea is all wrong, but the art is great. But that's orthodox, how could they condemn your pictures?"

Marvin smiled. "They did not see them—I mean they could not understand. Here is one they seemed to appreciate. This is Fulton's Scarlet Woman." It was simple enough. There was a background of vague, dreamy sky, against which floated glistening

yellow clouds, their shadows cool on the green below. In the foreground, stretched upon a bank, ablaze with a tangle of wild flowers, was a nude girl watching the coquetting of lover butterflies.

"I see—I see it all now—the fools to think that vulgar—the fools! Garner, damn you, you've got a career before you. You'll never be happy—but you'll be famous. Before you are half as old as I your pictures will be in the galleries of the world, you'll be a great American painter. I've been in all the galleries of Europe—seen all the masters, and I know originality when I see it. Stick to art." He paused, his eyes on "The Lost Soul," then he turned to go. "Good-bye," he said, almost reverently. He touched Marvin's proffered hand and hobbled out.

CHAPTER VII.

"Herd 'em say at Benvanue you'd been held up fer immerality?" broke in the driver with innocent, but brutal frankness, when the lumbering stage got under way.

"Yes," answered Marvin, unflinchingly, his eyes on the green world that revolved about them in great swelling billows.

"So you'r kinder out on bail—nobody but yerself knows if yer guilty er not? But most everybody says yer air—it's a kind of way people has. They seem glad when a feller gives 'em a chanct to believe 'em guilty of something. An' likely if you come clear they'll say you didn't git jestice."

He paused for a reply, but Marvin vouchsafing no response, he continued: "Folks air awful queer. When you first come, Grogan was always sayin', 'Boggs, you must come roun' an' hear our new preacher—he's a regular top-notch'; an' everybody was sayin' fine things. Got my curiosity so roused up I'z 'most a-mind to drop in an' sample the salvation you'z dishin' out. Then I thought if it pleased Grogan it shore couldn't be the genuine article. Gro-

gan ain't got no more conscience than a prairie rattler. He says to me this mornin' when I went after the mail, 'Be careful, Boggs, er the Parson'll 'tamernate yer morals,' an' I says, 'Hardly, after 'sociatin' with you so long.'

"Parson, you made one mistake. You ought to 'a' 'zibited them pichers. The good brothers would 'a' fell over themselves fer a peep. There come a show to Retta onct durin' the Fair, where they danced the couchie-couchie. Well, bless my eyes, when the talk go roun' what was goin' on, ever' shoutin' Methodists, can't-fall Baptist, water-salvation Campbellite, an' what-not had to go an' see it. They all come out condemning the ongodly sight, an' if you ast 'em why they went, they'd say they didn't want to condemn a thing 'thout seein' it. Ol' Hanks, who runs the Cattle King, said he guessed they'd all go to hell an' sample it to see if the Parson's reports air true, an' git 'quainted with the devil to see if he's black as he's painted. Anyway, yer show wouldn't 'a' been no worse 'n the shindig they had at Benvanue las' year fer the heathen. You paid fifty cents to git in, includin' a snack you could git down at the grocery store fer fifteen cents—the extra thirty-five was fer the heathen. Well, when they'd aggervated yer appertite with sanwishes an' pickles, you could git an extra glass of pink lemonade fer a dime. After we'd et all the doin's we were goin' to, they put up

one of them fancy weddin'lookin' cakes, covered with white sugar an' red gum drops, to be voted to the handsomest girl at ten cents a vote. Well, they got up an awful excitement. Every feller wanted his girl to git the cake. The cowboys from one ranch got to buckin' the cowboys from ernother, an' Grogan an' ol' man Harkness aggin' 'em on. Well, some of them fools spent their salaries months ahead. Widow Smith's two boys from the river got to votin' on Bill's sweetheart, who he was engaged to, an' they kept borrowin' right an' left till by the time the thing was over, they owed mor'n they's worth, an' didn't git the cake neither. Miz Smith come over the nex' day with blood in her eye an' rounded up the Parson. Said it was the first time her boys ever gambled in their lives, an' it was a shame fer 'em to learn it in a meetin' house; 'specially as Ida Grogan got the cake, who could afford to have all the cake she wanted 'thout robbin' the community of their savin's. Yes, you made a mistake, Parson—you ought to 'a' showed them pichers. I'd 'a' give a roun' dollar myself to 'a' seen 'em. Nothin' I dote on like the female figger. God done his levelist I'm thinkin' when he made it—if he did build it out of a rib. My information of the Bible is, she's the last thing he made, an' I can believe it, fer he shore had his han' in. An' if I'm not misinformed, he didn't make her any clothes. I guess if he'd 'a' lived in this age of the world they'd

had 'im up fer immerality. Yes, they do go the Lord Almighty one better, fer all the wonderful to-do they make 'bout him. Ever since Adam an' Eve, folks been actin' as if God didn't know his bizness. They begin scramblin' fer fig leaves as soon as they seen therselves, an' their offsprings has kept up the scramble till you'd think God jest made 'em skellingtons to hang clothes on. That's my idee," he said, questioningly, as if to draw out his companion.

"I see," said Marvin, encouragingly; "that you are in the habit of having ideas of your own."

"Well, yes, you might put it that way; though I ain't makin' no pretentions to force 'em on nobody else. I take it the Lord gives us a headpiece fer more purposes than to stick a hat on, though you might not think so when you see how the wimin have taken to riggin' it out. An' you can't tell what's in a head by what's on it. 'Most any day over at Retta you can see a fifty dollar hat carryin' roun' a fifteen cent head that's got jest 'nough brains in it to make it giggle. But I ain't sayin' nothin' agin it. This is a free country. I has my idees an' lets folks have theirs. Reckin, though, maybe, I do think more'n some. Ridin' on the prairie by myself, winter an' summer, day an' night, with nothin' to do but think, I cover a lot of ground in the course of a year. Sometime I think a feller can think too much. Some things you jest better let alone an' let the other feller do the

thinkin' 'bout. I git to chasin' an' idee, an' I think an' think, till my brain fairly burns an' I git so mixed up I almost question if I'm me er not me. One day I got to tryin' to solve the problem, who made God, an' I do believe if I hadn't 'a' let up when I did, I'd be a jibberin' idit in a lunatick 'sylum."

A turn in the road brought them in sight of the spires of Retta.

"Well, yere's fer luck, an' I hope you'll come out O.K.," he said, grasping Marvin's hand in a vise-like grip and flinging it from him. "Good-bye."

Marvin clambered down, and Boggs lumbered off against a red sunset, slashing the horses and bellowing:

"Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie
In a little grave jest six by three,
Where the cayotes will howl over me."

PART FOUR.

CHAPTER I.

Marvin stood motionless on the bustling square, watching the activities that flowed and ebbed about him. Two motives had drawn him to Harris. It was to be the meeting place of the next annual conference, and, in the metropolis, he hoped it might be possible to find work. But as he now caught glimpses of the green lanes and blue sky at the ends of the streets, and watched the sun-tanned farmers come and go, there came to him a longing to bury himself in the country with his paints and brush. It was while debating the matter that scraps of a conversation that reached him, turned the scale.

"Bond, do you know of a boy that would like to help with the chores for his keep?" There was a soft, musical cadence in the voice that fell pleasantly on the ear. Marvin turned toward the speaker. He was a man of fifty, broad of girth, of compact symmetrical mold. His bearded face reminded him of pictures he had seen of Moses. His small blue eyes twinkled

with good humor, and there was an expression about his mouth that broadened into a smile at the slightest provocation. Marvin was pleased with his striking physique.

"You'll not likely find a boy on them terms, Curry," returned the other in a nasal twang. "Cotton choppin' will soon be yere an' then everything that can hol' a hoe handle will be wantin' his dollar a day. Wish I could git a kid fer his keep."

They moved down the street. Marvin kept his eye on the larger man and followed. It occurred to him that this might be the opportunity that he was looking for. When Curry at length turned from the crowd, Marvin approached and touched him on the arm.

"I'd like to speak to you," he said, as the other turned in surprise.

"Why, shore," said the stranger, grasping Marvin's hand. "What can I do for you?"

Marvin made known his desire to secure light work of some kind in the country and referred to the conversation he had overheard.

"Well, now, I'll tell you," said the other; it's like this: Wife's porely an' I have to hump myself to keep things goin'. I jest want someone to help with the chores, mornin' an' night. Cotton choppin' I'd pay extra fer—what you been doin'?"

Marvin hesitated, then answered: "School teaching."

The other glanced him over critically.

"Well, Perfesser," he said, after an instant, "you'r welcome to a try. Ain't nobody but me an' wife, an' I'll be glad of yer company. When could you come out, if you come?"

"I'd like to go right out with you."

"Well, I like the way you have of makin' up yer min'. I never have no patience with these hang-fire people. They git me so mixed up with their hemmin' an' hawin' an' perhaps an' I'll think 'bout it, till I don't know my own min.' Bond's been 'scortin' me roun' the streets of Harris all mornin' like a love sick kid that wants to pop the question an' can't, tryin' to decide if he'll swāp his filly fer my ol' mule. He ain't made up his min' yet an' he's got me so be-fuddled I don't know if I want to er not."

Curry bubbled over with exuberance of spirits. He was one of those health animals that make the most of life, taking things as they come, philosophically, cheerfully, letting the future take care of itself.

"I tell you, Perfesser," he began tentatively, as they rolled along the country lanes; "if you'r goin' to stay out to my place, I'll have to ast a favor of you. You know my wife's delicate an' she can't stan' fer me to smoke, an' she thinks it's bad fer my heart. Well, I humor her. So when she's roun' I talk awful down on terbacker an' whisky. It pleases her an' don't do me no harm. I hope you use 'em, fer it'll

make it a lot easier fer me. You see when I want a nip er take a notion fer a smoke, I've got to come over town, go see a neighbor er take to the woods. Then I take a pinch of this an' she ain't none the wiser." He held up a kernel of assafoetida. "I tell her the doctor prescribed it fer my heart. Well, she stan's it all right, though I'm shore it must be worser then terbacker." He produced some cheap cheroots and stopped the horses while they lighted them.

"Yes," he went on, puffing contentedly; "since wife's been porely I've humored her 'bout everything. 'Tain't good fer ailin' people to be crossed. She'll be askin' you questions when I'm not roun' an' I thought I'd better give you a hint. You jest tell her I'm out an' out fer temperance, an' agree to everything she says. You know sick people ain't hardly responsible; an' I've noticed different diseases affect people in different ways. Now, wife's got liver complaint an' stomach trouble an' it seems to make her feel blue an' talk blue. Ol' man Smith, over on the creek, has consumption, but you couldn't never make him believe it. He's lively as a cricket an' says he's goin' to live till he's a hundred. Everybody can see he's already standin' in the grave. Billings, he's one of my neighbors, has the rehumatiz. That's an awful tetchy ailment. You don't dare to cross 'im even in look er he'll rail out on you worse'n tarnation. You never seen sech a fiery temper. But it ain't Billings,

it's jest his rheumatiz. Then there's Sam Doty, he's got heart trouble an' looks solemcholy as a funeral. I feel like I'd made a visit to the graveyard every time I go over to see him. An' it's jest that way with most people. It's the ailments that make them what they air, an' they can't help it. Sometime I think lyin' an' stealin' an' general oneryness is jest a kind of disease, an' a great many people ought to be taken to the doctor 'stead of jail." He paused a moment as if expecting Marvin to controvert his radical views, then went on cheerfully:

"I reckon there ain't nothin' the matter with me, unless it's jest general cussedness. Wife says I'm too full of jokes an' frivolity fer a religus man an' a deacon. But I believe that Schriptur which says religin was never designed to make our pleasures less. I guess the Lord knowed what he was 'bout when he made man an' didn't put nothin' in him that oughtn't be there. Anyway, I'm goin' to enjoy myself while I can, fer, as the sayin' goes, when I die I'll be a long time dead. But, of course, this is my private opinion. When I'm with my wife what she says goes. I thought I'd explain so you'd understan' the contradictory way I have of expressin' myself. A married man is jest half a man, you know, an' it's my idee the better half's entitled to do the thinkin' an' have her way. But it ain't nothin' but fair the other half should have a private opinion in a private way.

You'll soon learn how to take my wife, an' you'll like her.

"But yere's where we stop," he broke off, as he drew up the horses before a large board gate, some distance from a queer little house, in the door of which stood a tall, slatternly woman.

"Yonder's Elvira, now," he said, taking a pinch of assafoetida. He handed Marvin the reins and sprang down to open the gate. "You drive in," he said, "I'll run on an' tell wife who you air, er she might have a nervous spell. Elvira don't like onexpected visitors. But don't you fear," he added reassuringly, slamming to the gate and hurrying on ahead.

Mrs. Curry was one of a too common type of housewife that can be found in almost any farm community—prematurely old from overwork, mental inactivity and patent medicine. Her face was like a yellow paste; there was a woebegone, vacant look in her eyes, and in her veins ran sluggishly all the drugs of the pharmacopœa.

"I don't see what ever possessed you to come out yere to do chores, bein' a school teacher, as you say," she whined, in a thin, quavering voice.

"Oh, I guess he jest wants to rough it a little," said Curry, considerately.

"I'm sure I'll like it very much, if I can please you with my work," Marvin added, cheerfully.

Mrs. Curry gave vent to a sound suggesting a combination of a hiss and clack.

"Well, I guess if you want to, you can. Any nigger can feed stock an' carry slop to the hogs——"

"Oh, I like that," said Marvin; "but I'm afraid I'll hardly earn my board if that's all you can find for me to do."

"Well, yer keep'll be rough enough. An' I reckon Lem'll see that ye earn it."

"Well, ol' woman, time I was gittin' supper—I'm hungry as a wolf," broke in Curry. "Jest make yerself at home, Perfesser."

He entered the kitchen, his wife following, dragging herself wearily.

An hour later they sat down to a meal of fried bacon, corn bread, sour milk and black coffee.

"It's pretty rough fare," said Curry, "but eggs an' butter will soon be cheaper an' you can have all you care fer—you like eggs? They bring a fancy price an' we're sellin' 'em all now. Money's pretty scarce an' Elvira has to have her physic."

"The corn bread and milk just suit me," returned Marvin.

"An' the vegetables will soon be in—you like vegetables? They fetch a good price over at Harris, but we always raise plenty fer our own use. Though Elvira don't care fer 'em. She thinks them store things air best fer her health—wheatlum, prunelet,

forcem, an' the like—an' I guess she's right," he hastened to add. "Persons in delicate health need something of the kind," he said, gulping down cup after cup of black coffee.

"Do you smoke, chew er drink?" asked Mrs. Curry, gazing at Marvin with threatening vacuity.

"I am sorry to say that I smoke," returned Marvin, deprecatingly. "I know it's a bad habit, but I formed it when I didn't know any better."

"No terbacker fer me," said Curry, positively. "It's bad fer the heart, an' worse fer the pocket, an' Elvira can't stan' my breath. I love it, but I gave it up."

"Well, if I was you, I'd quit, young man. I'd be ashame to say I couldn't, when you can if you want to. That's what I tol' Lem, an' when he made up his min' he quit. If you'll take assafoetida it will help you. Anyway, I won't have you smokin' 'bout the house. I can't stan' it an' I won't," she insisted shrilly.

"Quit, young man, quit short off," Curry advised earnestly; "I'll always be thankful to Elvira fer showin' me the error of my way. Have some more of the buttermilk. I see you like it. I can't drink it. Makes me go dead to sleep on my feet. Wife can't sleep nights an' I tell her to try buttermilk, but she can't drink it neither. She takes Celery Sprouts

Cordial. That's a fine medicine. Elvira's taken onto a hundred bottles, an' I don't doubt but she'd be in her grave if she hadn't."

"Well, I ain't givin' the Cordial all the credit. I think Sartin's Sa'sparilla, Filkin's Female Favorite an' Brown's Blood Balm air doin' me jest as much good. I take 'em turn about, after meals an' before, an' Plain People's Pills at night. They seem to keep me out of bed, but I don't git my strength back, an' I don't feel like I use' to. I heard over at Miz Smith's to-day that there was a new remedy fer my complaints bein' sold over to Harris. Soon as I save up egg money enough, I want to try it, an'——"

"Shore, Elvira, you'll have it, if I 'ave to git it on tick. You make a note of it an' remin' me nex' time I go over."

Curry rose from the table. "Now, we'll feed an' I'll show you 'bout the place, Perfesser. Elvira, you let the dishes alone, I'll wash 'em up when I git back. Go lay down."

They walked about the little farm and at length entered a wood. Curry produced the remaining cheroots and they sat down on a log to smoke. The sun had gone down, and a cool breeze swept over the darkening fields. Curry threw off his hat and lifting his broad, good-humored face to the dimming sky, remarked joyously:

"Now, this is fine, Perfesser." Then after a little, "An' I'm awful glad you smoke. I see you ketch on. Oh, we'll git 'long swimmin'."

When they rose to go, he poked his companion in the ribs. There was a pungent odor on the air.

"Have a nibble," he said.

CHAPTER II.

Marvin's quarters was a half story attic. Only in a space of a few feet in the centre of the room could one stand erect, the roof sloping down on either side almost to the floor.

"Look out fer yer head an' keep in the middle of the road," sang out his guide. Curry turned down the quilts, told Marvin to make himself at home, and assuring him that he would "yell up" at the proper time in the morning, began the descent.

When he was gone, Marvin stood for some minutes looking about the room. On either side of the attic were small square windows with sliding shutters. In one gable a door opened onto a small porch. He stepped out and sat down on a chair he found there. It was evidently an unfrequented spot, for he crushed beneath his feet dry leaves that had likely fallen the winter before. The branches of the trees that grew near overshadowed the porch, giving one the feeling of being perched among the treetops. As he sat peering out into the dark, a grey luminousness crept up the sky, bringing into visibility the ragged tracery of woods across the black fields. Then the yellow rim

of the moon, etched with fantastic lace, grew in dimensions till its great white disc floated free in the steel-grey depths. Upon the air sounded a faint musical note, and to this Marvin found himself straining his ear and conjecturing its origin. It brought to his mind the memory of a great city, and with that memory came others—a face rose before him against the night, a face that had haunted him, and had a place in his dreams, since his inglorious departure from the metropolis. He sighed, but not in bitterness of soul. He was conscious even of a negative calm and content to-night. At last he had found a quiet harbor where he could rest awhile and take his bearing. Already he was planning the work he had set for himself. He rose and entered the room, undressed and stretched himself between cool, fragrant sheets.

When he woke the next morning, the sun had not risen, but as he glanced out the window he saw Curry already busy at work at the barn. He dressed and hurried out to join him.

“If you want to toughen yer muscles, pitch in,” said Curry, greeting him. He was shoveling manure from the stalls to a wagon. “This ain’t as elegant as teachin’ school, but it’s pretty much in the same line. Edjucation develops the min’, fertilizer grows corn an’ cotton. One sprouts the idee, the other the seed.

When you think about it, it's wonderful what a little education an' cow-dung will do. A few years ago the hillside where I'm hawling this wouldn't sprout peas—too pore fer anything. Well, I've been educatin' it with plenty manure fer couple years, an' now it beats the valley field. I call it my Jim Biggs patch. Jim's the son of ol' man Biggs that lives on Kechi. The ol' man got turrible discouraged 'bout Jim. He jest nacherly wouldn't take to farmin', but he was great on speechifyin' an' politics. Winters he kept the whole neighborhood stirred up with his debates at the school-house. Well, he got after his pa to let him git an education. He went over to the Harris High School, then to college, then he studied law. Now he's a partner of Senator Herbert, an' prosecutin' attorney. That's what a little educatin' done fer Jim—jest what the manure done fer the hillside. Jim was over lectioneerin' me one day an' I took him over to see my fine crop of cotton. Well, when I told him I called it my Jim Biggs patch, an' why, he seemed kinder pleased, an' says: 'Curry, I guess education done the work; hadn't been fer that I'd still be humpin' myself behind the plow.' But education has got to have something to work on, he says, an' if I'd dig down in the hillside I'd find a substratum of clay that held the fertilizer, er it would all disappear to nowhere. 'Curry, I've got the substratum,' he says, givin' me a wink. 'Vote fer me

an' I'll show you what kind of crop I'll grow.' Well, I voted fer 'im."

Some hens with large broods of chickens had been following the movements of the shovels, looking for turned up grain and insects. As Curry wheeled toward the wagon, his big foot trod on a fluffy white chick. There was a muffled shriek that threw the brood into a panic, and the white ball turned on its back, its little red feet jerking convulsively. It gasped a time or two, and was dead. As Curry glanced at what he had done a look of pain came onto his face.

"Pore little, silly thing," he said, picking it up and stroking it awkwardly.

He stepped to one side and dug out a spadeful of dirt, dropped it in and covered it.

"Daren't leave it where an ol' sow'll find it. If they once git the taste of young chickens, there's no cure but to kill 'em. It's worse'n the terbacker habit fer stickin'. I guess that chick was predestined never to sizzle in a fryin' pan," he went on philosophizing "An' I'z jest helpin' 'long the plans of Providence in steppin' on it—not a sparrow falls to the groun' 'thout His knowledge, an' they wouldn't fall 'thout He willed it. Yes, I believe God's running things, an' to say things is runnin' wrong is to reflect on his 'bility an' judgement. If He saves you, you'r saved, an' if He damns you, you'r damned, an' there's an'

end to it. I believe I'm one of the saved, an' I'll never know no different till I wake up in the sweet-bye-and-bye. An' if I fetch up at the 'tother place, why, there ain't no use worryin' 'bout it yere. Yes, God made Curry, an' he meant him to work this little farm, have a sick wife, smoke terbacker, take his dram, when he can git it, an' do a lot of devilish things, an' I ain't blamin' Him fer it. I'm satisfied if He is, but He mustn't expect me to be anybody but Curry. Yes, it was predestinated before the foundation of the world that I'd be shovelin' manure an' talkin' to you this very mornin', an' step on that silly chick—God works in a mysterious way His wonders to perform, as the good book says.

"But there's wife callin', an' I guess it's predestined we have some breakfast," he said, swinging his great body toward the house, his broad face wreathed with lines of contentment, his eyes reflecting back the sparkle of the sky.

That evening as Marvin and Curry sat on the log in the concealment of the woods, smoking their pipes, there floated on the night the sound of distant music. Marvin questioned his companion as to its origin.

"That comes from Laramore's house. He owns these woods. He's from up North somewhere—New York, they say. He's wonderful rich, an' since he bought the ranch, he spends a few months down yere every year. That's his girl playin' the piano. They

say she's a holy terror—goes everywhere by herself, hunts with a gun, climbs trees, an' goes in swimmin'—but I ain't condemnin' her fer that. Though you can't believe all you hear 'bout people when they're doin' their best to please everybody, an' I guess you can't believe nothin' you hear 'bout people that ain't tryin' to please nobody. It's my idee a feller has a right to live to please hisself, an' Laramore is as good as any of us, I reckon. Never seen him but onct, but he'z always treated me white. Two of my hogs got through his fence, an' when I went over fer them I shore thought I'd get a blowin' up, an' like as not find my hogs killed, that's generally the way they do 'bout yere. Well, he said he was sorry I had to lose the mornin', but he didn't know whose they were an' couldn't sen' 'em home. He'd penned 'em up, an' when I went out to git 'em they's layin' down stupid with the feed he'd give 'em, an' whole ears of corn under their noses they hadn't touched. I'z shore proud of them hogs fer their manners, fer they hadn't had a mouthful of corn fer months. He had one of the men fetch 'em home in a waggin, an' I rode with him. An' that's the extent of my 'quaintance with Laramore.

CHAPTER III.

An exuberant June day danced over the face of the green world. That elusive, pervasive spirit we call life was at its flood. A mystical vitality stirred and trembled in every living thing—everywhere was movement, activity.

Marvin sat before his easel at the edge of a clearing, well in the shadow of a giant liveoak; about him the grass, its white under surface quivering in the breeze, rippled a young sea. The trees glistened in the vivid green of fresh maturity. In the open, about the stumps, a sappy growth of sprouts had sprung up as if impatient to hide the unsightliness of their vanquished ancestors. From the yellow sunlight to the black shadows, wavering clouds of ephemera drifted joyously—making the most of their lifespan of a day. Hidden from the eye at the roots of the grass and weeds, armies of ants and insects played their lilliputian comedies and tragedies.

Abutting on the clearing were Curry's patches—rustling, snapping rows of corn, darker green ones of cotton. Back and forth the green flood moved Curry, his plow ripping a cool brown wave that bathed the

feet of the young corn. Midway the field bent the slender figure of a girl, her head hid beneath the poke of her bonnet. High in the crystalline blue, white clouds, with oily, glistening convolutions, moved languidly, their shadows on the distant pasture lands, that were dappled with lazily moving cattle. There was a drowsily throbbing note in the air; the love-cry of mating and building birds; the passionate bellow of a penned-up bull, maddened at the stir of life he could not understand, could not quiet. On a girdled tree a hawk poised with wary eye, waiting a victim.

Marvin painted on obliviously, save when his eyes occasionally roved the landscape. During the weeks of work and isolation he had begun to learn that at the heart of all self-conscious life there ever lurks an insistent discontent—that to think is to be filled with uneasiness; that the only escape from self, from life, is in eager, persistent activity, and so he worked.

Mid-morning, when the sun blazed white toward the zenith, at a point just behind him a girl came swinging along the edge of the woods, her eyes sweeping the view. Seeing the artist beneath the trees, she stopped abruptly. Then stepping within the protection of the trees, she crept nearer, craning her head for a better view. Her espial seemed to be satisfactory. She gave a deft touch to the yellow locks that strayed from her wide-brimmed hat; rearranged the folds of lace at her throat, and, giving

her whole person a quick glance of inspection, assumed a graceful poise and tiptoed into the open. Some mystical influence seemed to move the worker under the trees. He stirred in his seat uneasily, threw a quick glance about the clearing, and rose to his feet. The new comer, whatever had been her intentions, was suddenly stricken with fear and fled precipitately into the woods, the swish of her skirts not unlike the whirr of wings. Marvin took a turn about the easel, glanced up into the foliage, into the sky, followed the line of woods, but saw nothing. The disturbing presence had vanished. With an unaccountable sense of disappointment he returned to his painting. But presently he started up and listened intently, a look of surprise on his face. From the depths of the woods there rose a soft musical note. He threw down his brush and sprang to his feet. It was a human voice—clear, liquid, compelling. He recalled that he was in Mr. Laramore's pasture and thought that this must be the tom-boy girl that Curry had spoken of. He was glad that he knew of the rancher's pacific attitude toward trespassers, and passed into the shadow of the trees, guided by the song. Soon he came upon a sight that held him rooted to the spot. From a branch of a tree that projected over the stream had been fastened a swing. Standing in this the singer swept back and forth rhythmically, as if keeping time to the wild

burst of melody; now high amid the treetops, now far over the water, her dress a white flashing reflection on the surface below.

While Marvin stood in open-eyed wonder and admiration, the swing, with a few convulsive jerks, came to a rest, and the occupant sprang to the ground. Turning toward him, she busied herself with her hair that had tumbled about her shoulders. There was a fine color on her cheeks and her blue eyes glowed with animation. Marvin gave a start of recognition. Where had he seen that face before? or was his sixth sense playing him a trick? But he questioned only for a second. His mind flashed back to a New York ferryboat, a dining-car, and he knew that he stood before the face of his dreams. She would not remember, but somehow he must let her know. But how? While he pondered she came briskly along the path. The next moment they stood face to face, looking into each other's eyes.

"I beg your pardon," Marvin said, confusedly; "I hope I have not frightened you?"

"Oh, I'm not afraid—just surprised," she said, a frank fearlessness in her eyes.

They stood a moment regarding each other in silence.

"May I pass?" she asked, naïvely.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," he said, stepping aside. She came forward slowly, almost brushing against

him as she passed. The nearness of her person filled him with a glad intoxication. But she was escaping him. He became desperate, strode after her, was soon at her side.

"You don't remember me?" he blurted recklessly.

Without slacking her pace, she glanced backward, her eyes flashing in startled amusement.

"I haven't forgotten you."

"But you have seen me before——"

She stopped haltingly. There was the slightest restraint in her manner, as if she suspected he might refer to her late espial.

"I—I—have seen you before?" she questioned.

"Years ago we were fellow travellers—I mean we travelled on the same train. I saw you—you——"

"No, I'm sure I don't remember—I was very young years ago."

"Of course you don't—you were crossing the Pennsylvania ferry in New York with your father—we stood close together against the railing—we looked into each other's eyes—you smiled and I have never forgotten," Marvin went on hurriedly. "I saw you again in the dining-car—you dropped your handkerchief—I picked it up and hastened after you, but you entered the sleeper before I overtook you. I was a passenger in the day coach—I didn't see you again—I still have the handkerchief——"

"What a good memory you have—and thank you for keeping the handkerchief. ' But how odd?"

"I shall be very glad to return it."

"Oh, thank you."

"I mean if you'd like me to?"

"It's very kind of you."

"You are Miss Laramore, I believe?"

"Yes."

"The people I am staying with spoke of you."

"Not very complimentary, I fear?"

"Oh, Mr. Curry likes you——"

"You are stopping there?"

"For a few months. I'm—I'm studying art—I've been doing some sketching——"

"Oh, you are an artist? How interesting."

"I was painting at the edge of the woods when I heard you singing. I'll be glad to show you—if you really care?"

They walked on together, Marvin holding the boughs aside as she passed, the folds of her white dress brushing his coatless arm.

During his absence the shadows had shifted and his easel was in the sunlight. He drew it beneath the tree and offered the stool. She sat down and looked at his painting with curious interest.

"You are an artist," she said approvingly, glancing toward the fields. "But how odd to find you here?"

"And you."

"I suppose my singing did sound a little out of place?"

"I thought it very beautiful."

"I hope to become an artist—I'm studying for grand opera. But you—you're ever so far ahead of me."

"Thank you. I'd be glad to show you some of my paintings."

"I'd like very much to see them."

An hour later they still sat in the grass beneath the tree, talking in that easy, confidential way possible only to old friends or people who have much in common. She rose to go.

"Good-bye, Mr. Artist."

"Good-bye, Miss Prima Donna."

Marvin gathered up his tubes and brushes, threw the easel across his shoulder, and strode through the sunshine, whistling a tune in gleeful abandon. He was not even conscious of the blazing sun, did not see the landscape that danced under his eyes, was alive only to the newly awakened passion that seemed to lift him from earth up into heaven.

CHAPTER IV.

"You don't eat enough to keep a hummin' bird alive," said Curry one morning at breakfast, as he gulped down his black coffee. "You've been stickin' to yer room an' picher makin' too close—an' you mope roun' like you'd lost yer last frien'. You need a change. Git ready an' ride over with me to Harris to-day. We'll drive over in the cool of mornin' an' come back after night—an' I'll inquire fer them Crimson Circulators, Elvira," he added, to forestall any objections his wife might have to his plans.

Marvin consented.

Reaching Harris, he drifted leisurely about the streets while Curry transacted his business. Coming upon an imposing church in his wanderings, he approached a man that looked to be a native and made inquiries. The man looked him over a moment. "You don't live yere?" he said.

When Marvin replied in the negative, he continued: "That's Parson Hill's church—er was till he left."

"He hasn't quit preaching?" Marvin asked, conscious of a strange quickening of interest.

"Ain't you heard the scandal?" the other said, edging closer. "Why, it's common talk fer the last month. Dyin' down now as them things will. Yes, they say, Hill got to lovin' the sisters too promiscuous, an' folks went to talkin'. Then he begin to act queer in his head—kind of a religus insanity dodge. The Elder sent him off to Colorado fer his health—but everybody understands. He'll come back O. K. an' be more popular with the sisters than ever. That's the way with the highsteeples."

Marvin thanked the stranger and passed on down the street. The spire of the church rose before him piercing a pale green sky, silent and somber. As he stood gazing on the darkening façade, a flood of light from the low sinking sun struck the windows—they shone red like great splotches of blood. There was something sinister about the great bleak structure with the glaring red eyes. Marvin took it as an unhappy omen. For he remembered that within its walls would take place his trial. He was oppressed with a presentiment of impending evil. He turned away with a feeling of loneliness, uneasiness, nameless dread. He walked hurriedly to the thronged street, elbowing his way blindly along. Then there was a friendly hand heavy on his back and a musical voice in his ear.

"Look like you'd been to a funeral—come, let's

have a bite to eat, an' we'll see if we can't find something to liven you up."

Marvin was conscious of a grateful response within at the touch and familiarity of this coarse, vital man; for the moment he envied him.

"I'm glad you're back," he said heartily, in a tone that pleased the other immensely. Involuntarily he put his arm within Curry's. They came to a cheap restaurant and entered. When the meal was under way, his companion looked up and said: "I tell you, Garner, what we'll do. When we finish this grub, we'll go over an' see some ol' frien's of mine, an' have some music. Now, this ain't no slouch of a meal fer a quarter, is it?"

When they stepped out into the street, Curry lit a cigar.

"No assafoetida fer mine over yere." He slapped Marvin on the shoulder and broke into a loud guffaw. "You'll be thinkin' me a regular ol' harry of a man," he said complacently; "an' I reckon I am. Let's have a drink, then we'll hunt up my frien's."

Marvin declined the invitation, but waited before the saloon. Curry soon came out, wiping his mouth with the back of his hairy hand.

"Some of the brethren go to the drug store when they want a drink—ast fer soda an' wink fer whisky. But when I want a drink I go where they don't charge fer the wink. If it's pizen in the saloon, it's

pizen in the drug store," he said, bubbling over with good humor as the aforesaid poison began to stir in his blood.

"Now, fer my frien's," he said, his arm around the other as they moved down the street.

They walked some blocks and came to a silent part of the town where the street-lamps made but a feeble impression on the gloom. The thoroughfare was deserted but for the occasional cab that rattled over the loose paving stones. Curry stopped before a handsome house with a red transom. Marvin was suddenly filled with misgiving.

"Your friends might not like visitors this time of night," he said, drawing back. "I'll wait for you here."

There was a queer chuckle in Curry's throat as he pulled the door bell.

"Pshaw, they'll be glad to see you."

The door opened softly and bathed them in a flood of red light. They were ushered into an elegant drawing-room by a colored maid. Marvin wondered to see how much at home Curry seemed amid such surroundings.

"Send out the girls," he said with the easy assurance of one long familiar with the inmates of the house. "Tell Mable Uncle Joe is come to see her."

The maid who had regarded him with an impassive face, moved noiselessly through the door.

Curry sank back on the plush cushions, a fine sparkle in his eyes, an eager expression on his face Marvin had not seen there before. It flashed through his mind that he must be very fond of his friends, and wondered he had never spoken of them. Curry cast a quick, furtive glance at his companion and looked away quickly. Then a young woman entered. Marvin rose involuntarily to be introduced.

"Why, hello, Uncle Joe, haven't seen you in a coon's age," she said, plumping down on his lap, and embracing him with mechanical ardor. "Who's yer frien'? Hello modest," she said, addressing the artist. "Is this yer first visit to the Red Light?"

"I beg your pardon," said Marvin, instinctively bowing to the speaker. "I see I am intruding. Good night, madam." He turned to the door. It seemed to him that he was a long time reaching it. As it closed on him, there broke upon his ear shrieks of laughter. He put his hands to them and ran down the street. He was hot with a sense of shame. What had he said or done to lead his friend to so mistake his character. He became sadly confused; found himself wondering if everybody was guilty of what he knew himself innocent. Was it a secret understanding that this was something common to all men—the being found out the only crime? Never before had he entered the palace of the Scarlet Woman. The thought of it, colored by the glimpse he had had,

filled him with loathing and pity. He had often thought of men and women overcome by unexpected temptation with a kind of fellow feeling since his mortifying experience at Whiterock. But to deliberately seek temptation, hunt out the fallen woman—his sensitive nature was shocked at the thought. How could he face Curry again? But he had meant a kindness—he must look at it in that light. He began to plan how he might make their meeting least embarrassing. He hurried up to the stores and bought a box of cigars; then found the wagon at the Farmer's Campyard and sat down to wait. Growing impatient, he hitched in the horses so that they could start immediately upon his friend's return. When at last the huge form of the farmer loomed against the yellow flicker of the street-lights, Marvin began to whistle cheerfully.

"Well, you're just in time," he called. "Jump in and drive out—I'll shut the gate." He thrust the reins in Curry's hands and ran on ahead. He clambered to the seat and produced the cigars.

"Here's a box of assafoetida antidote for us."

"Been blowin' yerself?" said Curry in a flat tone of gayety. His late effervescence of spirits had evaporated.

"Yes, let's try one." They lighted their cigars, avoiding each other's eyes. Then they fell to puffing in silence. Marvin felt that he had indicated to his

companion that no word of apology was necessary and made no further effort at conversation.

It was one of those open, luminous nights in mid-summer. Not a cloud appeared in the wide grey vaults, and every star seemed to dance with an exuberance of brilliancy. The fields stretched shadowy on either hand, a ripple of silver playing over them as blade and leaf caught the star-light. As they rattled along the top of the hill or plunged into the damp of valley, pungent with rank vegetation, the sky-line moved about them a shifting panorama. Now a farm-house, with its cone-shaped cedars, stood stark on the sky, now the edge of a wood like the teeth of a colossal saw, now a gap in the hills opened to the eye vistas into regions of mystically soft light. A languid breeze stirred in the upper depths and mingled with the hot breath that rose from the earth. The bark of a dog, the rumble of a distant wagon, occasionally floated on the air. Marvin had forgotten his companion as his eye roved the scene.

"Garner, I'm a brute," Curry cried into the night vehemently. There was genuine penitance in his voice. "I know you think me a beastly ol' hypocrite, an' I am—I can't help it. I've tried an' tried, swore to myself, to God, I'd never do it agin, an' I go straight an' do it the first chanct. It was wrong to deceive you—but I thought I'z doin' you a favor. Most young men would 'a' thanked me."

Marvin made no reply, and he went on: "You put me to shame, Garner, me bein' a church member an' a deacon; but the Lord put it in me an' I can't help it, an' if He can, He don't." He had talked himself from repentance to justification.

"You'll not hol' it agin me, Garner? You know——"

"We'll forget it," said Marvin in a calm tone of finality. "Isn't this a fine night?"

"Well, hadn't noticed it," returned the other, lifting his head, disconcerted at Marvin's summary dismissal of the unsavory subject.

They rode for some time in silence. The dark fields moving in slow procession past them; above, the stars revolving in the mysterious spaces. Curry let his hand fall caressingly on his companion's knee.

"Garner, you're a gentleman," he said with conviction.

CHAPTER V.

Mrs. Curry had been in Harris some days taking treatment of a magnetic healer. In the meantime her husband had been holding high jinks. The flask he brought from town set boldly on the mantle, and he went about the place smoking without fear or thought of assafoetida.

One day he came in from a tour of the fields his face glowing like a coal, dripping with moisture and blowing like an ox.

"I'm goin' to make half bale to the acre if I make a pound," he said enthusiastically. "She's done made, rain er shine. Three more weeks an' it'll be ready to tackle," and he held out some plump green boles for Marvin's inspection.

"I don't know what's got into that Laramore girl," he said, after a little. "I can't go to that east field that jines their pasture 'thout seein' her sittin' under the big liveoak er hear her somewhere in the woods singin' like she's tryin' to bust her throat. An' sech outlandish songs. Now, there's a girl fer you, fer all her tom-boy ways. Everytime I see her makes me feel like a boy jest turned his teens."

"Well, bless my eyes," he broke off suddenly, star-

ing across the fields. Marvin looked in that direction. Miss Laramore was midway the cotton rows, the brownish green foliage in rank luxuriance laving her breast. As she parted the boughs with her arms she looked like a swimmer battling the waves.

"I wonder what she's after," mused Curry. "She shorely can't know wife's gone, though I reckon it wouldn't make no difference to her."

Marvin's heart beat riotously. He felt that Curry must surely hear it and guess his secret. The cause of their perturbation came on gracefully, riding the green billows till at last they parted and she stood at the end of the rows. It was a picture of dainty elegance as she stood against the background of green and glistening blue; a white compact cloud in the far off space a halo above her head. She tossed a straying curl from her cheek and waved her hand toward the watchers. Marvin rose to his feet. Curry's eyes widened in amazement as he glanced from the girl to his companion.

"You know her?" he asked.

"We have met," said Marvin, lifting his hat, scarcely conscious of the other.

"Good morning, Mr. Artist," she said graciously, as she came forward and offered her hand.

"Good morning, Miss Prima Donna," he returned, admiration in his eyes as unmistakably as the sun in the heavens.

In the Shadow of God.

"I hope I didn't trample your crop, Mr. Curry; but I couldn't find the road, if really there is one."

"You're welcome to do all the tramplin' 'bout yere you're min' to, Miss," he said, shifting awkwardly from one foot to the other, glancing down at her small patent-leather boot. Her presence seemed to add a brightness to the white glow of the morning.

"What a nice cool place—and what a lovely view," she said, sweeping the fields and sky. "How big the world seems."

It was a tranquil morning of wide, clear distances, and Marvin was glad that it appealed to her.

"Well, Mr. Artist, I've come for a private view."

"They are up in my room—I'll bring them down."

"No, no; let me see your studio?"

Marvin hesitated. He glanced to where Curry stood, apparently rooted to the earth, regarding him with admiring awe. He seemed suddenly to realize that he made the proverbial crowd, and, turning, walked away stiffly, as if he felt two pair of eyes boring into him. When he was out of sight he sat down on the kitchen steps and mopped his brow.

"You'll not find it so big as out here—and there are steps to climb," said Marvin, dissuadingly.

"Oh, I don't mind."

"Then I shall be honored," he said, leading the way.

"Oh, what a cute little room," she exclaimed,

emerging from the perpendicular steps into the attic.

"Be careful of your head," cautioned Marvin. "You'll find it pleasanter out here," he said, stepping onto the porch and offering a chair.

"What a bird's nest of a place. Why, you're right up in the treetops and sky." She burst into a little trill of song. "But I mustn't do that—I'll frighten your birds," she said laughing, peering about into the foliage.

"They'll think you are one of them."

"Oh, thank you."

"You sing like a mocking-bird."

"Thanks number two—now for the pictures."

He brought out the first of the series of prairie views. She sat down and dropping her chin to the palm of her hand, scanned it critically. Marvin watched her narrowly, his eyes aglow with passion, pride. He needed no words to tell him that she was surprised and pleased. She could not conceal it.

"How cruel!" she exclaimed at last, as she studied "God in the Blizzard," an expression of pain on her face. "It almost makes me shiver. Mr. Garner, I think you must really be an artist." She looked up with frank admiration in her eyes.

"Thank you."

"And you've done all this work without having studied abroad?" she asked after a while.

"Only three months in New York."

"It's wonderful. It makes me feel fearful I haven't any talent. Why, I've been studying since I was knee high and I've got to take three years more in Berlin. Mr. Garner, I don't know much about such things, but it seems to me your pictures are wonderful. Would you mind if father came over to see them?"

"Why, I'd be glad."

"Now, I must go," she said, rising.

"I've shown you all the pictures."

"And I thank you."

"And I thank you—for coming."

"To see the pictures—or as an old friend?" she said archly.

"Both. I did not think you'd care—for the other."

"Have you forgotten how long we have known each other?"

"I thought you—had forgotten?"

"But you reminded me. I told father and he thought it quite remarkable that we should meet again, and that you should recognize me. You do not paint under the trees any more? I'm afraid I frightened you off."

"No, I've not been painting much lately." He had an impulse to tell her why—how he had thought of nothing but her—how he loved her. But he realized how utterly foolish it would be. Even if she should care for him it would be wrong to take advantage of

her innocence. He could not tell her that he was in disgrace; he could not deceive her; the only thing possible was for her to go quickly out of his life. A gloom settled on him that numbed his tongue. His spirits seemed for the moment to darken hers. She regarded him in perplexity. Then, after a moment, she said cheerfully.

"I know just how you feel. It's awful to get discouraged. But you'll succeed—you'll succeed."

"Thank you," he said coloring.

She stepped quickly into the room. Turning to look for the stairs, her eyes fell upon his easel. On it was an unfinished sketch of herself. There was just an instant hesitation, then she began the descent. He conducted her along the turning-rows between the patches and helped her over the fence. Then they stood for a space in constrained silence.

"I shall expect you over soon to hear me sing."

"Thank you, very much."

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye." He watched her picking her way along the trees, till the last flutter of her dress had vanished, a sickening oppression weighing him down. He felt he had acted boorishly. But it was just the same; he would see her no more. But on second thought he wished it might have ended differently. He turned and walked slowly toward the house. Curry stood beneath the trees waiting him, a broad

grin on his face. He slapped Marvin on the back and broke into a loud laugh.

"Bully fer you, Garner. Oh, you're a sly one. How long has it been goin' on?"

Marvin's face went white. "Mr. Curry, what do you mean?" he cried, a tremor in his voice, his eyes flashing.

Curry was confounded, and sank into a chair shame-faced.

"Why, man," said Marvin, with vehement indignation; "she's pure as a flower; she's an angel."

"I'm a foul-minded ol' sinner," moaned Curry. "Garner, fergive me. I see it all now—you love her?"

"Love her?—God, I could worship her!"

He strode back and forth the baked earth, beside himself with resentment, passion. His mind was in a whirl of confusion. He thought for a moment of Curry as the embodiment of the spirit of the world—gross, animal, evil. One was a fool to try to be good and pure. Then his eyes fell on the bowed head of the offender; he was filled with pity, for he had come to love the crude old man sincerely.

"It's all right, Mr. Curry," he said kindly. "Of course, you couldn't know."

"Garner, you put me to shame," Curry faltered, not looking up. Marvin turned, leaving the drooping figure staring stupidly at the hot earth.

CHAPTER VI.

"Yes, you can bank on 'em bein' cold. Garner an' me fetched 'em in this mornin' 'fore sun up," said Curry, laying a watermelon on some boards, the third he had brought up from the cellar.

"Well, tastin' is believin'," said Roberts, picking up a long butcher's knife and slashing open the green spheres. He then leaned back and surveyed the six red, bleeding hearts as if he deserved credit for the inviting feast.

"Pitch in, pitch in," urged Curry. "I didn't fetch 'em out yere to look at."

"Well, I don't know," said Brown. "Looks like they might 'a' been cut from a catalogue."

"An' that's sayin' a good deal," returned Roberts; "fer they do color the pichers up wonderful."

"Well, picher er no picher, yere goes. Can't stan' the aggervatin' look of 'em no longer."

"Fine, Curry, fine—never tasted a better one. Jest cold to the taste," said Smith, biting into a generous slice. "But speakin' of pichers—I hear that young feller Garner is makin' 'em out of everything in

sight roun' yere? Queer how some folks wastes their time?"

"Well, Jim Smith, when you can make a picher that'll fetch a hundred dollars clean cash, I reckon you'll hardly call it wastin' of time."

"You don't say he sells 'em fer a hundred?"

"That's what I do. That Laramore girl come over one day to see his pickers, then in a few days the ol' man turned up an' plunked down a hundred fer one no bigger than the top of a cracker box. Why, I could git my arms full of 'em jest as big an' jest as much color to 'em, with a calendar stuck on to boot, over to Harris fer the astin'. But Garner's none yer ordinary chaps, an' I think I'm on to a thing er two. He's got something in his min' bigger than pickers. He's in love with that Laramore girl. It's my idee he's follered 'em down from New York an' the picher makin' is jest an excuse. But he's got it bad. Whole days he don't do a blessed thing but mope roun' the house er wander 'bout the woods like he's lost. No appetite at all."

"Yes, them's the symptoms," said Brown. "I remember when I'z courtin' Jane there'z weeks I didn't scarcely know who I was. One day I went over fer the mail an' stood starin' at the postmaster till he says, 'what's yer name?' Darn me, if I could tell. Bill Simpson happened in 'bout that time, an' I says, 'Bill, who am I?' Well, Bill jest bust out

in one of them idit laughs of his an' says, 'You'r a darn lunatik.' The postmaster grinned an' says I'd come to the wrong place."

"A very unprovidential thing that a feller should lose his senses jest at the time when he needs 'em most," said Graham.

"Maybe it's the ol' man that's makin' Garner so loony?" suggested Roberts.

"Well, throwin' good money away on that picher looks like he might 'a' meant to encourage him. But it's true 'bout him bein' a inferdel. I looked to see him struck down the way he went on with his blasphemy the day he's over. When he come down from seein' the pichers, I fetched out some China Clings an' he set down an' talked jest as sociable as a common farmer. Well, 'bout that time Tom Rutan happened in, an' first thing you knowed he'd tackled Laramore. Tom, you know, would tackle anything—he ain't got no more sense. I've no doubt if he got a chanct he'd buttonhole the President an' tell him jest how to run the government. Always been a mystery to me how these fellers that's never done nothin' can tell the other feller exactly how he ought to do it; without a breath of religin they know where everybody else is wrong; couldn't be 'lected dog pelter but know how to run the world. Well, Tom had heard of Laramore's onreligusness an' waded in to show him the error of his way. But wasn't no time till

he was gawkin' with his mouth open like a fool, that he is. Why, that man knows more in a minit than Tom Rutan ever hearn of. That's jest the trouble with him—he knows too much. When a man gits so edjucated he thinks he can fix up a God an' religin to suit his own idees, why, edjucation has overreached itself. Why, he said there wasn't no God, jest laws of Nature run things; that man growed up from nothin', devoluted, I believe he called it, from tad-poles, monkeys, an' sech. That there wasn't no heaven er hell only in men's min's; no sin, jest right an' wrong, an' what follers 'em, an' that the greatest evil in the world was to be ignorant an' not able to think."

"Well, now," said Brown; "no doubt he was larned. But it was the wrong kind. There's two kinds of wisdom; that of the wise an' that of the foolish. The Scripchers say, 'The fool has said in his heart there is no God,' an' 'agin it says, 'It is hid from the wise an' revealed unto babes,' an' if I'd 'a' been Tom I'd 'a' quoted 'em to him an' stopped his mouth."

"How you goin' to stop a feller's mouth when it's done closed?" said Roberts. "Why, Laramore don't think no more of yer Scripchers than I do of a last year's almanac. Scripcher was good enough fer them that didn't know better, but we know better. An' it's a weakkneed feller that's 'fraid of what he knows

'cause it don't fit what he's been taught somebody else thought they knowed. What did God A'mighty give us a headpiece fer, grantin' there is a Almighty, if it wasn't fer us to use? Laramore was right. We can think jest the same as them Jews."

"Roberts, you air speakin' blasphemy. An' it's a darin' thing fer a man in yer condition of life to do. If you's rich an' could have yer good time yere, ye might snap yer finger in the face of Providence. But we pore devils ought to try an' stan' in with the Almighty, fer if he don't look after us in kingdom come, we'll find ourselves in a hard row of stumps. The trouble all grows out of thinkin'. We ain't no bizness thinkin'. God put us yere to live. He's thought the whole thing out fer us an' none of yer head work er mine is goin' to change it; an' then, fer that matter, you'll have all eternity to think in. Take my advice, git the most out of this life an' stan' in with the Almighty fer the nex'."

"No doubt you'r right, Curry," said Graham; "but you must admit the Scripchers do say some hard sayin's. An' show me the man that keeps 'em. When I think of that, I jest says to myself I'll be lost anyhow, an' there ain't no use worryin' 'bout it."

"But there's where you'r wrong," returned Curry. "The good Lord's done kept the sayin's fer us. He died fer our sins. If we don't sin what's the use of his dyin'? He don't save us yere—we all know that.

Look at Laramore, rich an' blasphemous; an' look at me, believin' an' pore as Job's turkey. But jest wait till the nex' world. Then we'll see who wears the purple an' fine linen an' dines sumptuously every day——"

"But you'll be spirits," insisted Roberts; "nobody fer robes ner appetite fer sumptuous fare."

"Well, I don't know 'bout that kind of heaven. If I don't have this body it won't be me, an' if it ain't me where do I come in? I don't take no stock in yer spirit heaven. Think of eternity an' you never hear the dinner horn, an' no marryin' er givin' in marriage, an' the habit so strong on us."

"Now, that's a new idee," said Graham; "not hearin' the dinner horn. But I wouldn't worry 'bout t'other, less'n we all had a chanct to git a fresh partner an' no likelihood of makin' a bad chice."

"There you go, Graham; always havin' a fling at the female sex. One would think you made a mistake when you got hitched to Jemima—but I remember you were keen enough fer the harnessin'."

"Well," returned Graham; "marryin' is like horse tradin'. You want to know what you'r 'bout er keep out, fer you never can tell what you'r gittin'. A woman's sharper'n a jockey fer patchin' up defects. But it's a mighty pore man that'll go 'bout the neighborhood tellin' he's made a bad bargain."

"Well, it's my opinion," broke in Roberts, "that

it's a mighty pore woman that ain't better than we deserve. We'r jest male animals when all's said. An' speakin' of heaven—I guess a woman has as much to do with makin' it as the Almighty you talk so much about—I wouldn't care fer heaven without 'em, as Curry says, ner——”

“Beggin' yer pardin, Roberts, an' not meanin' to change the subject, but how's yer wife doin' now, Curry?” asked Brown.

“Why, she says she's doin' fine—feels like a new creature, though how long it'll last is another question.”

“What do you think of the healer?” asked Roberts.

“Oh, he's a humbug, but wife believes in him. An' if she can be humbugged into believin' she's well, it's jest as good as docterin', though it do come a little higher. But people like to be humbugged, an' the higher it comes the better it is.”

“Yes, you air right,” assented Brown. “People love to be humbugged. I took over my wife's eggs to Harris t'other day, an' when the grocer looked at 'em he ast if they were fresh. I tol' him they were 'bout a week ol', fer I knowed my wife had been savin' 'em up 'bout that long. Well, he wouldn't look at 'em. Said he was buyin' only fresh eggs, not over a day ol'. Well, I went out an' waited roun' the corner fer half an hour an' then went back an' hunted up the same feller. ‘Look yere,’ I says, ‘I've got some

fresh eggs, jest gathered 'em up this mornin', what'll you give me fer 'em?' 'Fifteen cents,' he says. 'I won't take it,' I says. 'These air fresh eggs an' ought to bring a fancy price.' Well, sir, he give me twenty-two fer them eggs."

"You don't call that humbuggin'?" asked Roberts.

"Shore; I'd like to know what else you'd call it?"

"Why, I 'd call it straight lyin'."

"What's the difference? You make a feller think he's gittin' what he's payin' fer. If he don't it's his lookout. That's bizness."

"Well, them melons ain't no humbug, fer a fact," said Roberts, rising; "but I've got to go, men. All come over."

CHAPTER VII.

September with its grey haziness and purple distances stole over the land. The sun shone down obliquely with a languid palor, and a vague somberness touched the landscape. The fields of corn and cotton stretched great blotches of white and brown, a colossal checker-board under the eye. Midway the rows of Curry's patch, late one afternoon, Marvin crawled slowly, his hands moving in and out the browning stems as he plucked the white pods, his sack trailing behind him like a collapsed balloon dragging on the ground. A straw hat slouched over his eyes; his flannel shirt was stained with bruised leaves, and his trousers were encrusted with dirt from crawling on his knees. A few rows off, slightly in advance, were the stooped figures of Curry and Emma. He could hear their voices occasionally in desultory remarks. He straightened up, his hands on his hip, and threw back his shoulder as if to ease them a moment from the strained posture. His eyes wandered leisurely over the view. In every direction groups of bowed toilers moved across the fields. A distant hillside rose against the sky like a white cloud. He looked in another

direction and followed the windings of a black road. On it wagons moved slowly, piled high with cotton for the gins or bales for the market. As he stood facing the low setting sun, there was nothing in his appearance out of harmony with his surroundings—he looked native to the soil. Yet his thoughts were not of corn and cotton; the yield or market price. It was now but a few days till the convening of the conference at Harris. Already he had received notification of the date of the trial. Yet he found himself looking forward to it with strange indifference. Since he had given up, what he considered, his hopeless passion, he had in spite of himself lost interest in his art. It seemed to him that life or effort of any kind would never again be worth while. His ambitions had suddenly dropped from him and he felt himself drifting. It had come to him more than once not to attend the conference; to let it do its worst. He would remain with Curry. The crude, simple life just at this juncture appealed to him strongly. He was tired of the struggle that brought only humiliation, unrest. But these were only passing moods. He knew that he could not be content long in the monotonous round of mere physical exertion, however numbing to his pain at present. He had gone too far; he had realized glimpses of another life that he could not forget. He could not go back to the plain on which Curry moved no more than Curry could climb to his.

The sun sank a great yellow ball through the grey haze. He reached the end of the row and went with his companions to the pen to weigh his cotton and empty his sack.

"Hundred and fifty for you to-day, Garner," said Curry. "You'd make a number one cotton-picker in a season er two. But why you'd rather pick cotton at six-bits a day than paint hundred-dollar pichers is more'n I can guess. You wouldn't ketch me breakin' my back at it if it wasn't that er starve. If we keep up this lick, we'll have it out in two more weeks."

"When are you going over to Harris with a load, Mr. Curry?" asked Marvin.

"'Bout day after termorrow. I've got two bales I'd like to git on the market while the price is up."

"I'll get you to take my things over, then."

"Leavin' us Saturday?" said Curry, astonished.

"Why, you ain't said a word about it?"

"No, I didn't think it necessary till I got ready to go."

"Where you goin'?—New York? I hear the Larasmores air leavin' in a few days."

"No; I'll not go to New York. I'll remain in Harris a while. I've not settled on any plans."

"Well, I shore hate to see you go."

Curry looked disappointed. He was sure now that his conjectures were correct. He had thought a lot of the change that had come over Marvin since Miss

Laramore's visit. He could account for it in no other way than that something had gone wrong between them. He walked with Marvin along the turning rows, now grown up with weeds, passed under the trees before the house, and out to the barn, in silence. Here he stopped and faced his companion.

"Garner, I don't want to interfere where it ain't none of my bizness, but you'r in trouble. If I can help you any way, er it will do you good to talk it over with some one, why, out with it. It won't go no further. I like you an' it makes me feel sad to see you goin' 'bout all weighed down in yer min'. It'll do you good to let it out. Trouble is like biliousness, the quicker you git it out of yer system the better. You've been tryin' to work it out an' failed, now 'spose you try talking. 'Tain't good for yer health to be nursin' yer woes."

"Thank you, Mr. Curry; if you could help me I'd be glad to have you do so. You've been very kind to me."

"Now, look yere, Garner, you can't fool me. I've lived too long not to 'a' had a few things soak into my head. I know what's the matter—you've quarrelled with yer swetheart. Now, honest?"

"No, I've quarrelled with no one."

Curry regarded him in perplexity. He was at his wits'-end. "Well, I hope whatever it is, you'll come out all right. But I want you to know I'm yer frien',

when you need me," and he turned and began the feeding.

After supper he told his wife he had to go to see a neighbor. He passed into the lane and followed it till out of sight of the house; then he climbed the fence and plunged into the woods in the direction of Laramore's. Reaching the house, he inquired for Miss Mildred. She came out, and, though surprised at his visit, greeted him pleasantly and asked him in.

"No, thank you," he said hurriedly; "jest come over to speak a word with you, if you don't min', Miss Laramore."

"Why, no," she said, coming down the steps to his side. "Is there something I can do for you?"

Curry hesitated but an instant. "Mr. Garner is leavin' day after termorrow," he said abruptly. "He's been terrible troubled since you were over to see him."

"Why, I'm sure I'm sorry."

"I thought maybe something had happened between you," he went on bluntly. "An'—an' I happen to know Garner worships the ground you walk on."

"It's very kind of you to tell me. Did he ask you to?"

"Oh, gracious, no. I couldn't git a word outen him, that's why I come. He'd be roarin' mad if he knew what I'm doin'. I seen something was prayin' on his min' an' as you didn't come over agin I thought maybe you'd quarrelled er something. You'll not min' my

interferin' an' not breathe a word to him. Garner's my fren' an' I'd like to do him a good turn if I can. I jest thought I'd let you know he's goin'."

"It's very kind of you." She turned to the door. "Good night, Mr. Curry."

The following day as the cotton-pickers were emptying their sacks at the end of the rows, a song burst from the trees just beyond. They turned in surprise and saw Miss Laramore coming across the pasture knee-deep in the tangle of weeds, spikes of scarlet flowers in her hand, pinned on her bosom and festooning her hat.

"See what I have been picking, Mr. Artist," she said, holding out the blossoms. Marvin's face went as red as the flowers as he glanced down at his clothes.

"So you've given up painting fields and gone to picking them?" she said, appearing not to notice his embarrassment. "Mr. Curry, won't you let me help you too? I'm sure it must be ever so nice. Why, it looks like a heap of snow," she said, running her hand over the loose cotton in the pen.

"You'd not find cotton-picking as nice as picking flowers, Miss Laramore, if you should try," said Marvin quietly, recovering his composure.

"I'm sure I'd like it for a while. May I have some of these stalks to go with my blossoms, Mr. Curry?" she said, breaking off some full-opened boles. "My

friends in New York would think them beautiful flowers."

"Well, Em, we must go," said Curry, turning. He moved off briskly, Emma trotting at his side. The two left alone stood facing each other a moment in silence.

"How unkind of you not to keep your word?" she said reproachfully.

"It is not because I did not care to—I've been very busy," he returned, hardening himself to the impulses that began to stir within his soul.

"I thought we were going to be such good friends?"

"I hope we are."

"Friends find time to see each other. You didn't care to hear me sing?"

"I can't tell how much I desire it. Some day I hope I may—when you are a great prima donna."

"One does not like to have their friends wait till they have succeeded before showing their appreciation."

"I do appreciate — your kindness — and your father's. I—do not deserve it."

"But you do. Father said you have unusual talent. He meant to speak to you when you came over."

"I am very sorry."

"You do not work nights?"

"No, but unfortunately I have no company hands," he said, smiling bitterly, holding up his soiled, blood-stained fingers.

"Oh," she gasped, pity coming into her eyes. "What makes you do it?"

"Why do we do a great many things we do not like to do?"

"But you can paint. If you'd take your pictures to New York I'm sure you'd be able to sell them. Father said so."

"It's very kind of you to take an interest in my work, but I can't go to New York. I may give up painting."

"I can't understand why you should."

"My mother does not approve."

"How very odd. I'd think she'd be proud of you."

He looked at her a moment, his passion burning in his eyes. If he could only tell her everything—how he was torn asunder by a conflict of emotions and motives. But he could not explain so that she would understand—it would serve no purpose. In the end he must give her up. Wishing to close the interview that now was becoming painful, fearing that he might be tempted to some rash act, he said, still looking into her eyes, "I leave to-morrow."

"That means I will see you no more."

"I hope not." Then he fell silent; his face became ashen and drawn.

"I suppose I must tell you good-bye," she said, lifting her eyes from the ground.

"Yes, I suppose so."

"I had hoped that I might have you paint me—before we parted?"

"I have. I am leaving the picture for you. Mr. Curry will give it to you when I am gone."

"How kind of you. But how could you do it—never to have had a sitting?"

"I couldn't help doing it."

"Oh, Mr. Garner, how puzzling you are!"

"Everything is a puzzle—ambition, life, love."

"I don't think I understand?"

"Nor I." He at last had forgotten himself. Unconsciously he had moved nearer. "But I do know I've seen nothing but you, waking and sleeping, since I met you in the woods. I've thought of you, dreamed of you, loved you—yes, loved you"—he lifted his arms as if to enfold her within them, saw how stained they were, and dropped them shame-faced—"till it's made me foolish, mad."

She gave a little startled cry. He snatched her hand and pressed his lips upon it passionately.

"Good-bye," he cried hoarsely, turning abruptly and hurrying away.

PART FIVE.**CHAPTER I.**

“Why, hello, Garner, I’m glad to see you,” said Nichols, shaking Marvin’s hand with extravagant friendliness. “How have you been making it with the cowboys and coyotes? You might have let us hear from you occasionally in the ‘Advocate’ after that spread-eagle send-off you got. You must tell me about it. I’ve had a regular walk-over this year—over a hundred conversions—fifty dollars over on the apportionment. It’s a secret, but I know you’ll keep it—the Elder has promised me Blossom Station—parsonage—six hundred dollars. I’ve learned a few things all right. If you want to go up you must collect up, and a little over,” he said exultantly, edging closer, a self-important grimace on his face; “and stand in with the Elder. I had my folks present him with a silk hat and goldheaded cane. He knew who was at the bottom of it, and it did the work. Where you going to stop? I’m up at Colonel Bumby’s—he met me at the station with a carriage—makes me see visions to think of how they feed. By the way, have

you heard the news?—I'm married. Just last week—I'm on my bridal tour, as it were. You remember Sally Hays?—you boarded with her uncle at White-rock. She's now Mrs. Nichols. Since you saw her she's been left a black land farm. You must drop round and see her. Get married—it pays. Come, I want to introduce you to Col. Bumby and the brethren."

They entered the lobby of the church. They found the Rev. Dr. Hill the centre of a group of men, who listened intently to a story he was telling. He stood with his head thrown back, a fine light in his eyes, a smile hovering about his lips that betrayed his consciousness of power. The climax came and he joined the men in the convulsive laughter that greeted it.

"Yes, it's rich," he said, his face quickly assuming its usual expression. "I got that from an Eastern guy out at Colorado Springs." His eyes fell on the newcomer. "Why, how are you, Garner? I'm glad to see you. I haven't forgot that thrill you gave us at Herman. How'd you find the wild and woolly?"

Marvin murmured some evasive commonplaces, conscious of a vague sense of gratitude, for he now knew that his disgrace was not generally known. He moved as one in a dream; uneasy with a secret dread that these men would suddenly turn their backs and hurry away, leaving him alone to be derided by the loquacious Nichols. He was impatient to anticipate

them and save himself at least this humiliation. He made some excuse and escaped into the streets. He was conscious of a hardening process going on within to meet the inevitable blow when it fell. Then his mind underwent one of those unaccountable freaks, and he laughed aloud as he pictured Nichols's change of attitude when he learned the truth.

Two days dragged by, then the long-dreaded eventful morning arrived. The secretary rose and announced the trial of Rev. Marvin Garner that afternoon in the First Baptist Church. He named the Rev. Stucky as counsel for the church, and sat down. The intelligence fell upon the audience like a shock. The silent spaces of the church seemed suddenly filled with a tense gloom.

"Is Brother Garner present?" asked the Bishop in a solemn voice, looking out over the blank faces. Marvin rose, his head lifted in defiant poise, as he looked straight into the Bishop's eyes.

"I am," he answered unfalteringly.

"Have you selected your counsel?"

"I am innocent. I desire no counsel," he said, sweeping the faces lifted to his. When he sat down a buzz of voices filled the room. The Bishop rapped for silence and the proceedings went on as usual. Marvin shrank into his seat, feeling as isolated as if he were on the other side of the globe. A cynical smile marred for a moment his fine face as he

watched Nichols slink from his side. He sat there a long time; it seemed to him days, weeks, seeing nothing, hearing nothing. At last he was brought to his senses by a persistent tugging at his knee. He glanced down and saw a closed hand resting on it. It opened slightly and he saw a bit of paper. He took it and crushed it in his palm. When he found an opportunity he read: "Get the best counsel you can. Stucky will ruin you—innocent or not. It is his boast never to have been defeated in a debate or trial. He'd wreck a dozen lives to make good his boast. Take my advice for God's sake."

Marvin turned the paper and wrote: "I have done no wrong. God is my counsel. If he can't win against Stucky, I shall believe in Stucky. Thank you sincerely." He handed it to his well-wisher and took a good look at his face. He could not remember to have seen him before, but he felt sure that he was a layman, and in the months to come, often in hours of blackness, when almost in despair, that face rose before him and kept him from losing faith utterly in his kind.

CHAPTER II.

The First Baptist Church stood at the end of the street where the city and country met. Looking east, miles of farm land lay brown beneath the eye, fretted here and there by the winding black roads. In the other direction, the street lifted in gradual slope to the more active part of the town, and at the point where it opened onto the square, the heads of men and horses, tops of buggies, rims of wheels, moved in bizarre procession. As Marvin stood in front of the little church, he recalled the times he had passed it with no intuitions of the enactments soon to take place within. He had rode by with Curry the first day of their meeting, and again only three days ago when he had driven him over for the last time. And now he found himself trying to imagine the activities of his friend rather than conjecturing the outcome of the proceedings that concerned him so vitally. At last he turned and entered the building. Fifteen or twenty men eyed him curiously as he took a seat. Nichols, who had managed to have himself appointed clerk, glanced at Marvin with a sneering look of tri-

umph. They were waiting him, and Stucky rose and said:

"Let us pray." Marvin mechanically got on his knees. He no longer felt any inclination to pray. He even found himself thinking of Stucky's familiarity with God as mockery. The deed was done; what muttering toward God would change it? For all the prayers that might be said these men would act in keeping with their enlightenment and prejudices. If they thought it immoral to paint a nude picture, prayer would not make them think otherwise. And the conviction grew upon him that God was powerless in the hands of ignorant, prejudiced men.

The lower half of the window had been raised to let in the air. From his position Marvin could see framed in the opening a patch of blue sky and hilltops miles away. As he looked a wagon came to view and crawled along the glistening road. Above it a white cloud floated. Upon this his eyes became fixed and it resolved itself into a face. He no longer heard Stucky's voice and was not aware when it ceased. He still knelt, his head bent toward the window, his eyes on the white cloud, when someone touched him on the arm. He looked up with a slight start and resumed his seat. Stucky was regarding him with a puzzled stare.

The offending picture was brought forward by an assistant. He handled it in a bungling manner, and

Marvin stepped across the room and took it from him.

"You have got to have a proper light on a picture," he said.

The eyes of the men turned to the canvas. It was plain they saw only a naked woman; and a naked woman meant only one thing to them. Marvin had painted that picture; that one thing was in his mind, was a moving motive. And that one thing was immoral outside the license vouchsafed in marriage, therefore Marvin was immoral. Thus they reasoned.

"Think of a man holding that image in his mind during the weeks that it took to paint it, and at the same time preaching the gospel," said Stucky, going on with his argument.

"Who made the human form, Brother Stucky?" Marvin asked abruptly.

"Why, God Almighty."

"Then God Almighty is immoral. I only——"

But Stucky silenced him, ranting of blasphemy and irreverence. Marvin sank back, a look of weary indifference on his face. He did not open his mouth again.

* * * * *

"Yes, you might call it a brave act, standing up there protesting his innocence and refusing assistance, but it was foolhardy, and like most foolhardy acts it will cost him dear," said Laney, the hotel man, addressing a coterie of men-about-town who had

dropped into his office. Do I think he's innocent? Ain't no doubt he thinks so. Fur's I can learn it's all a question 'bout a picture he painted—a naked woman—an' of course that's jest a matter of opinion—like most questions of morality. Some set of men would congratulate him on producin' a work of art, the question of right an' wrong wouldn't enter into it; but these parsons will make it all a question of right an' wrong, an' none of art. Most of them don't know no more 'bout art than a hog about heaven."

"Yes, he made a wrong play,—he set out defyin' 'em, as it were, to prove his guilt, an' they'll do it jest to show him they can."

"You're right. Parsons air great sticklers fer their reputations—it's their stock-in-trade—what people think of them. It's my idee if you strip 'em of their cloth they ain't no different from the rest of us. They put up a fine bluff with their sanctimonious ways, but if you'll scratch 'em you'll find the same human nature. Then they're jest like wimin—harder on each other than anybody else——"

"Yes, guess there's got to be a good deal of the woman in a preacher fer him to like his job. The church has got to be mostly a matter of wimin's aid societies, entertainments and pink teas, nowadays, anyhow. An' a man that's all man can't stomach that kind of thing fer a steady job. Now, that feller Hill—he's a sharp one fer you. That insanity dcdge was

a fine trick. The preacher don't know no sin but bein' found out—an' Hill was too slick fer 'em.

"Trouble with Garner, he's green; an' I guess it's a case of gittin' on the wrong job. He'll not think so, but it's the best thing that could 'a' happened. If reports air true, he's got a lot to him. He regular paralyzed the Bishop an' the whole caboodle over at Herman last conference. I heard a drummer tellin' 'bout it. He said he never seen nothin' like it, an' it was a pity to let that kind of talent go to waste——"

"Well, then, he'll likely go in fer law after the parsons git through with him. Chances air he'll be district attorney er state senator when the men who condemned him will still be humpin' themselves to make ends meet on a four-hundred-dollar circuit. I've knowed it to turn out that way before. Though he may be one of them visionary fools an' stick to his piccher-making an' starve."

"Well, he's considerable cut up, fer all his brave way. Been walkin' 'bout yere like he didn't have a speakin' acquaintance in the world; an' day before yesterday Miss More, the banker's daughter, ridin' him roun' in her buggy, showin' him off proud."

"Yes, that's the way of the world."

"Why, if I hadn't taken him in, he'd had to camp on the street. Think of it—all because he painted a naked woman—an' they call that Christian!"

"Pore devil."

“Lucky devil, you better say. It’ll be the makin’ of him, if the stuff’s in him. Mark my word, you can’t down a man fer long that ought’n to be down. That’s my observation.”

“But he ain’t gettin’ a square deal. Hill’s the man to stick, if they’ve got blood in their eye.”

“Bein’ in the hotel bizness, I’ve learned a lot ’bout human nature, an’ if young Garner ain’t a gentleman I ain’t never seen one.”

“’Tain’t a matter of bein’ a gentleman; it’s a matter of opinion. An’ knowin’ the men—the opinion will be agin him.”

CHAPTER III.

The afternoon business dragged wearily. To Marvin it seemed interminable as he sat alone, outwardly calm, meeting stoically the curious, condemning, pitying eyes that were turned upon him from time to time. The sun had already found the western windows and poured a broadside through the stained-glass upon the heads of the multitude, when Nichols stepped upon the platform and passed a paper to the Bishop. An expectant hush fell upon the house. All seemed to feel what was imminent. Already there was a craning of heads for a better view of the offender. The Bishop read in a calm, solemn voice: "We the jury find Marvin Garner guilty as charged." The sheet fell from his hand, and his head dropped forward thoughtfully as if he prayed for the unfortunate youth.

Marvin rose slowly to his feet, his face white with suppressed emotion. "Bishop, I am as innocent as you——" he began in a tense, tremulous voice.

Stucky sprang to his feet as if to stop the speaker; but Marvin turned toward him, a dominating light flashing in his eyes. "Stucky, sit down," he com-

manded sharply. Stucky staggered as if struck in the face, and, staring in impotent astonishment, dropped into his seat.

"That's all I have to say," Marvin added calmly, and picking up his hat walked proudly from the room. Not a soul stirred till his form had vanished; then a woman sobbed shrilly. Many heads bowed in prayer. Could Marvin have known of the hearts that went out to him helplessly he would have been moved to tears—but he did not know.

He plunged into the sunlight scarcely conscious of his movements, hurried on blindly, till it seemed to him years had rolled by since he faced the staring eyes of the throng. A great heaviness weighed him down. He could scarcely drag his feet. There was a wild turmoil in his brain. At length he found himself in a wide country lane, staring into a red, sinister sunset. Involuntarily he began to pray; checked himself; then, still gazing into the sky, he shook his clenched fist toward it: "God," he shouted vehemently, "damn you! see what you have done. Damn to hell such a God!" He broke into incoherent laughter, crying, "Fool, there is no God; it's all a lie, a lie!" Then lifting his arm, as if in defiance, he exclaimed: "Hear me, God or devil, whatever you be, from this day forth, forever, I defy you; do your damndest, I shall rule my own life! God damn you!"

He tottered to a fallen log, overcome, weak and limp from sheer strength of his passion. He buried his face in his hands and groaned. Life seemed too much for him. He had a vague feeling that he was not equal to the cruel world in which he found himself, in which he knew he must live. Deep in his soul he cried out that he might be like other men. He found himself wishing that he were Curry, Hill, anyone but himself.

When he lifted his face the sun had gone down; a pale afterglow lingered on the heavens, and shadows lay thick on field and wood. As he stared into the night, he was startled by the report of a gun near at hand. Presently a wounded rabbit crawled beneath the fence into the road, dragging a broken leg. With a quick glance around to make sure it had escaped the enemy, it began to apply the only surgery it knew—gnawing at the tendon that held the dangling limb. Suddenly it ceased, became as rigid as a bit of grey stone, its eyes points of wild light. It had become conscious of another presence, and hobbled into the brush. The wounded rabbit brought to Marvin's mind by some mysterious association of ideas thoughts of his mother—the one had a broken leg, the other would have a broken heart, and there was no God to heal either. He rose with a quick motion and turned toward the town. He plunged blindly along through the night, unseeing, on and on, no longer conscious of

time or place. He walked as one walks in a dream. Then he became vaguely aware of dim lights blinking about him in the dark, that someone approached, walked by his side, clutched his arm, was addressing him.

"Hello, Mr. Modest. Don't you know me?"

He stopped and stared at the speaker, dazed. Then like a memory-ghost of the past the face came back to him.

"You—you're Uncle Joe's girl," he mumbled.

"How good of you to remember me, you timid dear," she said, hurrying him along the street. They entered the house with the red transom, and she led him to her room. She ordered a bottle of wine and, pouring out a glass, pressed it to his lips.

"You don't know who I am?" he said, looking into her face as if she were an apparition or the creature of a bad dream.

"Why, yes, you're Uncle Joe's frien'. He tol' me 'bout you—you make pichers."

"That's all he knew—I was a preacher until today. I'm nothing now——"

"Oh, what you givin' me?"

"But it's true. Didn't you see it in the papers—about Garner?"

"But you ain't Garner?"

"But I am."

"Oh, come off; you can't fool me."

"But I am—I tell you I am." He drew a letter from his pocket—his mother's letter. "Read it," he said, thrusting it into her hand.

"Rev. Marvin Garner," she read. Then she looked at him, her cheeks suddenly pale. "True you'r Brother Garner?" she asked soberly.

"Of course—who do you think I am?"

She rose up quickly and gazed down at him, a fine pity coming onto her face. "Then you must go. I use' to be a shoutin' Methodist myself. Yes, you must git out—this ain't no place fer you? Run like you did before. Oh, it's a shame fer me to 'a' brought you yere." She caught hold of him and led him to the door. Seizing his hand, she kissed it impulsively. You'r good—good—I'm awful sorry—but nobody'll ever know—good-bye," and she closed the door.

CHAPTER IV.

As Marvin splashed along the country lane through a drizzling rain that hung a grey wall about him, blotting out the distant view, his mind was actively projecting itself into the future. Occasionally there rose before him visions of wealth, of fame, of love. Then he would call himself a fool to entertain such wild thoughts as he faced the facts of his life—disgraced, penniless, a book agent, hawking his wares from house to house. He felt himself almost a vagabond. Realities sobered him, and yet when soberest, deep in his soul there lived the dream. Was there something in the texture of the soul that matched the dream? Visions of a palace never came to a clod. Years afterward he recalled these visions and wondered if the soul has power to run ahead of life and bring back truthful intuitions, prescient messages from the future.

In the meantime he had gone calmly and thoughtfully over his religious beliefs and found a satisfying adjustment. God had become a great, impersonal fixed force; the personification of good, as the devil was of evil. Prayer was a rehearsing of the soul's

desires and hopes to itself; the object of it mattered nothing, the faith of the individual everything. The same results would follow if one prayed with equal faith to a stone, the sun or a miraculously born man. So he found himself continuing to pray when the impulse was strong upon him; poured out his soul to the sky, the landscape, the great force in and behind it all; breathed often his mother's name in fervent petitions. He recognized that it all was the impulse of a superstitious atavism that had its source in some far-off savage ancestor. Yet in his way he continued to pray and laugh at his prayers. Heaven was simply a state of the soul, the result of its faithfulness to its highest ideals. As to the hereafter he troubled little. He came to have no more fear of death than of sleep. He would fight it because there was work he wanted it to do, because he loved life. But he believed his death would mean no more than the death of a flower. From the seed scattered on the wind it would live again in a hundred flowers; so he would live again in the lives of others—through his work, his influence. He would be conscious of it no more than the dead flower would recognize itself in the blossoming offspring. Life was the important thing. Christ he believed in as a great and good man, and he prayed to him in the same way that he prayed to his own soul, and sought to mold his character in the light of his ethics. Religion was no longer to him

an object in itself; was valuable only as it affected the life for good. It was very simple, very inconsistent perhaps, but he found it very satisfying and it brought him great peace of mind. He realized that his beliefs were largely the product of his temperament and his experiences; and it seemed as sensible to him to seek to convert everyone to his artistic ideals as to his peculiar faith. One's religion was a result of one's self plus early influences and life's experiences.

Several months had passed when he stopped at a cross-road post office to inquire for mail. Among the letters that had been forwarded from place to place, was one some days old. It read: "Mother seriously ill. Come home at once." He left his prospectus and books with the postmaster and turned his horse toward Diamond, anxious, fearful. Two nights later, beneath a pale winter afterglow, he drove into the village. There was a look of ragged desolation about the crude clustered houses that saddened him. Devil's Backbone lifted in sinister aspect against the dun sky. The scene brought to his mind only the unhappy incidents lived in sight of it. He shuddered at the thought of having to bury himself here; was filled with pity as he imagined the lonely life his parents must live, bowed down to the earth with the humiliation of his disgrace. A fierce resentment flared up in his bosom. Why should he be disgraced?

Why should his parents suffer? Because of a blind superstitious belief that a God was directing their lives. It was all a lie. As well teach that He purposely let an idiot child be born of a drunken embrace; that He crippled innocent children and sent loathsome diseases to the helpless that they might be brought to accept salvation as laid down in some one of the thousand and one creeds. "Ignorance, superstition," he cried in the depths of his soul.

He drove his horse into the barn and cared for him, for he was cruelly fagged from the forced trip. He then walked slowly to the house, drawing back from the meeting he so anxiously desired. He stood hesitating at the door, gazing through the window into the lighted room. His father and Molly moved back and forth to the bedside of his mother. Her face was turned away, and he could see only the shrunken outline beneath the sheets. If his mother should die? He felt a keen sense of remorse that his pride had held him aloof from her as he remembered her letters breathing an unshaken faith in him and pathetic with an unworded appeal for his return. A sudden fear seized upon him, and he hurried in.

His father greeted him emotionlessly.

"Son," he said in a weak, unnatural voice, "I was afraid you would be too late." There was a haggard, hopeless look on his face; he moved with a weariness that filled Marvin with apprehension. He too must

be ill. It was borne in upon him that he had not been the greatest sufferer. But there was no reproach in his father's voice or manner, no restraint, no welcome; a blighting indifference seemed to have settled on his faculties.

There was a faint cry from the bed, and his mother lifted a thin, trembling hand toward him.

Marvin stepped to her side and stood dumb as he looked into the wasted face with the sad, wistful, burning eyes lifted to his. He knelt and kissed the white forehead, pressed the cold fingers between his palms, then buried his face in the quilts and sobbed. He no longer sought to reason or think—felt himself only a guilty thing. What was art? what did happiness signify now that he saw his mother slipping away—the only being who had never doubted him—who believed in him, loved him. If he had only died when he was a babe—better that than to have wrought this ruin. Oh, the futility of regret!

"Son, I knew you'd come," whispered his mother. "I prayed God—to spare my life—till you came—he is so good"—She closed her eyes a moment, exhausted, struggling for breath. His father sat at the window and stared out blankly into the night, his gaunt form drooping forlornly. Marvin recalled the time he had returned with his mother from conference—remembered how proud his father was—how he prophesied

he would some day be a bishop—now, he had brought him to this.

“God is so good,” repeated his mother, her hand fluttering in his like a weak, wounded bird, “to bring you back to me.”

“Yes, mother.”

She gave him an ineffable look, a look that is born only of a mother’s love, a feeble smile flitting on her face.

“Son, I want you to pray for me.”

“No, no, mother,” he cried, shrinking as from a blow. “I’m not worthy, I’m not worthy—you should pray for me, dear mother,” he protested.

“Son, for mamma,” she insisted weakly.

His soul cried out against it. He felt that it would be an irreverent deception. Anything but this—but he must—his mother must never know. She must die in peace.

His father knelt on the other side of the bed. Aunt Molly threw herself face downward on the floor and blubbered dolefully. Marvin, still holding his mother’s hand, began to pray in a low, tremulous voice. Calling up in his mind the image of the Christ as he was wont to do in the days of his faith, he repeated some simple petitions. When the conventional amen was said and he looked into his mother’s face it shone as if she looked upon the invisible.

“Thank you, son—God is so good. He has brought

you back to me—with the old faith. Son, God has great things—in store for you—he revealed it all to me—in a vision——” Her eyes closed, and a smile illuminated her face at the memory of the vision. “I saw you, son, honored, loved, happy—the multitude thronged you—like the time at conference. Be faithful, son—you pray so beautiful—voice like an angel—God bless you—my precious son.” She lay back on the pillows, the smile still hovering on her face, and soon fell asleep. His father continued to kneel at the bed. How worn and exhausted he must be with his vigils. Marvin felt a great yearning toward the father he had never known. If he could only in some way assure him of his love, comfort him. He stepped to his side and touched him.

“Father,” he said gently, “you had better lie down. I’ll sit up with mother.” He helped him to his feet, where he stood tottering, looking into the other’s face, a strange look of tenderness coming onto his own. “Son, I’ve been sick—your mother doesn’t know—help me to bed—I’m so tired.” Aunt Molly came and they laid him by his sleeping wife.

“Son,” he whispered, reaching out for his hand, “Forgive me. I thought you guilty—sins of the father—you understand—forgive me——” He turned his face toward the wife of his young manhood, the wife of his old age, and, slipping his hand softly, tremblingly to her bosom, closed his eyes.

Marvin dismissed Molly, dimmed the light and sat down at the foot of the bed. Often during the night he looked long upon the silent forms—the beings who had given him life—wondered and questioned. It was a great mystery. The irony of life. The cruelty of life.

A few days later he laid his parents away, side by side, in the little hillside graveyard in the shadow of Devil's Backbone. Then he sold the store and lands for a few thousand dollars, deeded the house and plot to Aunt Molly, and left for New York.

PART SIX.**CHAPTER I.**

It was a sultry morning in late June. Marvin Garner sat in a little stuffy hall-bedroom of a Fourteenth Street rooming-house, gazing abstractly out a back window into a disreputable court. Across it, from a window in which set a dingy flowerpot with a dead geranium, a frowsy-headed woman, bare-armed, was putting out her wash, the pulley screaming dismally as she drew in the clothesline. In a patch of sunlight that stole into the depths of the backyard canyon, a lone parrot sat preening its bedraggled plumage and making foolish gratuitous remarks. As Marvin's eye took in these sundry objects, a dirty, homeless cat crept cautiously into view, and eyed the bird furtively. It had espied some crumbs dropped beneath the cage and stole toward the tempting morsels. At last it pounced upon them and fled terror-stricken as Polly burst into blasphemous imprecations. Marvin turned away in disgust. The image of the forlorn cat stuck in his imagination. In a

confused way he associated it with himself in his present friendless isolation.

He had now been in New York over three years, and it seemed to him he was just as far from the realization of his ambitions as when he left the western prairies. His former experience in the city as a student and his later ones in the West had engendered in him a distrust of his kind. Because of this he had put forth no efforts to make friends. Finding upon his arrival that it was difficult to get interested again in his work, he began to drift about the city seeking to kill time and forget himself in visiting places of interest and amusement. But after a while this grew monotonous and he came to live more and more within himself, often sitting for hours staring into the gloomy backyard. Then he forced himself to take up his painting. But his interest was intermittent and often for days he was plunged into moods of black despair. He was very lonely and the atmosphere of the city oppressed and bewildered him. Often he asked himself why he remained, seeking to blind himself to the hope he still cherished. Fortunately he had sufficient funds, with economy, to keep him a few years longer, and he was spared uneasiness for the present on that score. He even felt confident in his happier moods that before that time he would succeed in finding recognition and a market. Then he became interested in the art galleries and exhibits,

and the old enthusiasm slowly returned. He began a careful study of the noted paintings of all schools, searching for the distinctive note that had given them universal interest. In the end he came to his own conclusions. It was the individuality, originality, of the artist that counted. They had seen things in a new light, expressed it in a new way. He was encouraged, for he realized that he could never succeed in painting pictures like the ones he studied. He lacked the imitative faculty; he must paint in his own way; put in the canvas what he saw and felt, if then it did not make an appeal he knew he must fail. He got out his pictures and began to go over them carefully, profiting by the new knowledge he had gained in his studies. Then in a confident mood one day he wrapped up "God in the Blizzard" and set out with it under his arm to the nearest art dealer. The proprietor looked it over with indifferent interest.

"No; I would not care to buy it," he said with friendly finality.

Marvin stood a moment hesitating, then picked up the picture and turned away—it seemed to him that it was the only thing he could do—when Mr. Swartz asked casually, "How much did you want for it?" Marvin remembered the canvas he had sold to Mr. Laramore, one not so large nor as good. "Would fifty dollars be too much?" he asked.

"Well, you don't put a cheap valuation on your

art," the other said, laughing. "Why, I couldn't sell it for half of that."

"Isn't it worth it?"

"Not with that name on it."

With a keen sense of disappointment Marvin turned again to the door.

"If you care to leave it here I'll be glad to sell it for you, if I have an offer. Though that isn't likely," said the dealer kindly. "I'd advise you to try the Academy. If they'll admit it to their exhibit it might help you."

Marvin inquired as to the necessary steps to be taken in compassing that end, and returned to his room. A few weeks later he received a note from the Academy informing him that his picture had been rejected. "You seem to see vividly," the note ran, "and you have temperament, but your work is crude, unconventional, devoid of technic. We would advise a few years study in a good art school."

With a determination to succeed in spite of Academies and art schools, Marvin went after "God in the Blizzard" and started forth again. After visiting three or four places without receiving any encouragement, he was directed to a new gallery on Fifth Avenue that made a specialty of exhibits of American art. Here they agreed to hang his picture. Some weeks passed, and he waited anxiously, hoping, yet dreading, to see what comment the art columns of the

newspapers would give it. But he looked in vain. They had not seen his picture, or had not considered it worthy a notice.

Marvin turned at last from the survey of the unsightly court and glanced wearily about his close quarters. It was little better than Curry's attic. There was a cot-bed, a dilapidated washstand and a table cluttered with paint brushes. Against the wall was propped an easel with a half-finished picture. This Marvin's eye rested on presently and he studied it with growing dissatisfaction. He was conscious of an impulse to toss it out of the window and be done with art. He was a fool to waste his time and money with the odds so heavily against him.

There was a timid knock at the door. He opened it and faced his landlady. She handed him a letter and vanished down the shadowy stairway. He returned to the cane-bottomed chair and looked the envelope over curiously. It had been forwarded from Mr. Donald's, the art dealer. It was seldom he received a letter, and as he tore it open he wondered what it could mean. He read:

"My dear Mr. Garner: The merits of a picture rarely arouse me to such enthusiasm as to inspire me to write the artist. But that is exactly what I am doing, and exactly what your picture did. Your striking originality deeply impressed me and I want you to know it, and that you have at least one very sin-

cere admirer of your art. I have been in the West and your picture makes one feel that he stands on one of those vast plains and beholds the awful blizzard sweep in fury across its face. The truthful realism is wonderful—the pathetic, tragic suffering of the dumb mother and calf. Of course I don't know to whom I am writing, perhaps an artist of fame whose work I have just happened upon, but I find myself imagining you a person native to the West, possessed of dreams great and limitless as the prairies. All the same, I am an ardent admirer.

“Sincerely,

“MABEL WONDELLS.”

Marvin's first thought upon reading the letter was that it was the impulsive effusions of some impressionable girl; but nevertheless he was conscious of a warm glow of satisfaction. His soul was athirst for some genuine expression of appreciation. And he felt these words to be sincere, if ill-judged and unimportant as a criticism of the merits of his picture. But they came like a gentle shower upon ground long parched by continued drought. He drank them in and was grateful, though conscious that they meant little in answering the needs and expectations of his soul. He was encouraged. There came to him a return of the old buoyant hopefulness. He sat down while the mood was on him and wrote:

"Dear Miss Wondells: I thank you heartily for your kind note. Of course I think my pictures have merit or I would not paint them, but I am finding it difficult to convince others. But your appreciation is very encouraging. If you like the 'Blizzard' why not others? I am going to begin work with new enthusiasm, so you see how your few lines helped me. Yes; I am of the West, and I suppose I have my dreams—who hasn't?

"I hope I may have the pleasure of thanking you personally sometime for your kind words.

"Truly,

"MARVIN GARNER."

Marvin now began the most ambitious canvas he had undertaken. The half-heartedness that had characterized his efforts since coming to the city dropped from him. He became absorbed in his work—forgot that he was in the city; forgot the picture that hung in the gallery, even forgot his meals. Then after some weeks he called on the dealer and showed the letter he had received, and learned that others had spoken favorably of his canvas. Mr. Donald suggested that he put on exhibition all his pictures, to which he readily agreed. He then returned to the canvas, "At the Edge of the Prairie," and for some weeks painted steadily. Then came a note from Mr. Donald asking him to call. Marvin wrote him that

he would come down in a few days, and returned to his work. Nearly a month slipped by when a second note came from the dealer. "At the Edge of the Prairie" was nearly completed. He put down his brush, jumped on a car and was soon walking up Fifth Avenue. As he approached the art store, he was attracted by a group of men standing before a picture in the window. He joined them and found that it was his "Spring" that held their attention. The onlookers were strangers to each other and there was little comment, but Marvin scanning their faces thought he saw on them unequivocal approval. One portly, well-dressed gentleman in turning away remarked to his neighbor, "Splendid work." Two young men pushed their way into the group. "Here it is. I want your opinion of it. I never heard of the artist, but if I'm any judge of art everybody will hear of him before long." The other scanned the picture critically, but he was evidently disappointed. "Oh, you are always making finds. It's like the others — just a trick of coloring. Seems rather crude——"

"But I tell you it's original—it's great. What do you think of it?" he asked, appealing to Marvin, noticing that he listened to their conversation.

"Oh, I rather like it, but your friend is right—it's crude."

"Well, crude or not, it holds you—that's the main

thing. Yes, sir, I predict the artist will make a hit—he deserves it.”

“Pshaw, Brown, geniuses would be as plentiful as motormen if your judgment meant anything.” They turned away and Marvin entered the gallery. Mr. Donald came toward him, smiling blandly, and extended his hand. “Good morning, Mr. Garner. Where have you been keeping yourself?”

“I’ve been painting—I forgot about your note.”

“Well, it’s not serious. I wanted to congratulate you.”

Then Marvin learned that five of his pictures had been sold. One gentleman had bought three, but he wished his name withheld, and had asked to be notified as soon as a new canvas was offered for sale.

Mr. Donald had filed the notices and criticisms. These he now put into the artist’s hand. It would be futile to try to express the gratification with which they were read, and unnecessary to reproduce them here. A few spoke of the pictures as being the work of a beginner; others referred to them as being rather promising efforts, but a few accorded to them high praise. We quote from one of the best:

“Mr. Garner has found a virgin soil—at least he has made it so by his very original treatment. ‘From Out the Sky,’ ‘Two Firmaments,’ and ‘Under the Sun,’ as realistic studies of sky and prairie effects, we do not think have been surpassed. They are illu-

sive, suggestive, compelling. He seems to have caught the distinctive note of the scene that appealed to him, which he reproduces with such vigorous truthfulness that the beholder shares the fine feeling that inspires his brush. Mr. Garner is strikingly unconventional, and has seemed to ignore all standards and accepted lines of procedure, if, in fact, he was familiar with them, which we doubt. He has seen clearly, felt keenly, and in his own way put the result on canvas. Some of his pictures remind one of the verses of Dante, romances of Poe, the adagio in Tchaikowsky's *Symphonie Pathetique*, passages from Wagner, Walt Whitman at his best. Others are pastoral in their simplicity; one, a symbolical canvas, 'Spring,' while a praiseworthy piece of art, inclines more to the conventional. We predict for Mr. Garner a place among America's greatest artists, and Mr. Garner is intensely American, which is not the least that can be said in his favor. His work as a whole is remarkable and should be seen by all interested in American art, though they will find that it will cheapen the average pictures."

CHAPTER II.

Marvin went home in a glow of inward exultation. He sat down and read over the criticisms again. Then he drew his chair to the window and looked out on the darkening court. Polly from the shadows below was shrieking lustily for a cracker; the muffled din of the city struck on his ear; its acrid odors floated on the languid breeze. He was conscious of a sudden feeling of disappointment. He wondered at the strange, unaccountable fluctuating of his moods as he thought of the canvases in the gallery, the few hundred dollars in his pocket and the extravagant criticisms. Why did he find so little satisfaction in it all? Why should his exaltation be so shortlived? Was life to be always leading him on like an illusive will-o'-the-wisp, only to disappoint him in the end? He stared gloomily into the night. And on the dingy curtain his imagination pictured a face. How the blue eyes that glowed with tenderness, pity, love, haunted him. If he should become famous? He must. Then he remembered that he had been in the city nearly four years. *She* must be in the city even now. He grew more cheerful; picked up his hat and

hurried into the streets. He spent the evening wandering about, scanning the faces of the passers-by, as if he expected to encounter—the blue eyes of his dreams.

A few days later he received a second letter from Miss Wondells. It bore the postmark of a summer resort in Canada. In part it ran:

“You don’t know how glad I am to learn that you are in New York and so close to us. We live at the St. Denis—just ma and pa and I. As soon as we return I shall expect you to call.

“If you needed encouragement I am glad my note helped you, but I assure you it but tamely expressed all your picture made me feel. And you really dream. You know our dreams come true if we work and wait? Though I hope you will not have to wait long for the recognition you deserve. I am confident you will not.

“Do you like music? I am sure you do. Don’t you know, I think of you as being expressed in one of Shubert’s Impromptues. I will play it for you sometime.

“I am directing my publishers, who happen to be the firm of which my father is head, to forward you a little story of mine, ‘Miserere,’ which I hope you may enjoy, though don’t feel under obligations to praise it. It is very slight, and my friends say that one can read it standing on one foot.

“May I hope to hear from you again? for I assure

you I am very much interested in the creator of that fine piece of art, 'God in the Blizzard'."

A musician! a writer! Then she was not the immature, sentimental girl that he had thought her. He found himself wondering how old she was, how she looked, and if he would like her. He had an impression that he would. Anyone who could appreciate his work would appeal to him as a friend, he was sure. Wondells? The name sounded familiar to him. Then he recalled the publishing house of Wondells, Fisk & Company, that was so well known and highly esteemed in the West, from which the clergy purchased their books. He had always thought of the firm with a kind of reverent awe. Was it possible that he was to be taken into the home of this eminent man? He must be very wealthy, and very prominent in the city.

When "Miserere" came he read it with keen enjoyment. He was not a judge of literature, but praised it extravagantly in his next letter. "The reason your friends say that it can be read standing on one foot is not because of its length, but because of its absorbing interest," he wrote.

With the prospect of a market and the promise of new friends, he began to think of looking up more comfortable quarters. He sat down and calculated his probable income. The money he had in the bank was drawing interest and he decided that he would

not touch it only in case of need. He had realized over two hundred dollars from his pictures, and he thought it might be possible now to live on the returns from his brush. He would try.

He spent the afternoons of three days looking for rooms. But each time returned tired and disappointed. He could find nothing he thought suitable that was within his reach. In looking over the advertisements in a morning paper he hit upon the following: "A bachelor will let two rooms of his furnished apartment to a suitable party for the summer. Terms reasonable." Having an indefinite idea as to what bachelor apartments were, he concluded to look up the number and investigate. He soon stood before an apartment hotel just off Broadway. A liveried flunky whisked him up to the fifth floor, then there was a flash of electric bulbs, black grinning face, and Marvin found himself standing alone in the corridor. He found a pearl button in the door facing and touched it. The door opened slowly and he found himself facing a stocky man of forty-five or six, well groomed, handsome, a good-humored smile on his face. He motioned his visitor to a chair, lighted a cigarette at an alcohol lamp that burned at his elbow, and stretched himself in a Morris chair. Marvin glanced about the room. He had not expected such elegance. It was a far cry from the "bach quarters" he had known in the West. It occurred to him that "terms

reasonable" did not mean to this well-conditioned man what it did to him.

"You came to see the rooms?" said Mr. Donham, pleasantly.

"Yes," returned Marvin; "but I'm afraid I would not be able to pay what you might expect."

"Oh, I don't know," said the other laughing. It seemed to come easy for him to laugh. "You see, I am expecting to be away a good deal this summer and it is more to have someone in the apartment, than the rent, that led me to insert the 'ad'. Of course, you'll expect us to exchange references?"

"I hadn't thought of that," said Marvin frankly. "I am a stranger in the city—and I'm afraid there is no one to whom I could refer. I paint—Mr. Donald knows me—that is, he handles my pictures."

"Oh, he'll do, I guess," said Donham, lighting a fresh cigarette and offering his visitor one. "I'll show you the rooms—they may not suit you after all."

In comparison with his hot, stuffy hall-bedroom they seemed like veritable parlors in their roomy luxuriance. He had never occupied anything like them. Donham during the while had been plying him with questions, and apparently had satisfied himself as to the character of his prospective tenant.

"If you like them, I think it will be all right about the references."

"I like them very much—but, you know, I'd want to use one as a kind of studio."

"Sure — paint anywhere — just make yourself at home." The price was surprisingly low, Marvin thought, and it was arranged that he move in.

That evening when his one small, much-battered trunk and pine-box were brought in, Donham had a hearty spell of laughing, but there was a kindness about it that took out the sting. Though nothing was said about the cause of his merriment, Marvin knew and joined in. Somehow he felt he could afford to be laughed at by this big, good-natured, ambitionless bachelor. He felt as superior to him as Donham's big, rawhide, silver-mounted trunk was superior to his antiquated pine-box. Then he liked him and felt under obligations to him for taking him into his comfortable apartment. If he afforded him amusement he was glad. When he was unpacking he asked Donham in to see his pictures. He was evidently surprised, and for an instant lost his easy air of assurance. In fact, he was embarrassed. He had the manner of one suddenly realizing that he has mistaken his man; or has been confidently explaining what he knows little of to one who turns out to be an expert. But his enlightenment only fed his good-humor. He sat down and chatted friendly, giving Marvin information about the locality and the best feeding arrangements. When he was through his

unpacking, Donham had him go down and take dinner with him at a Broadway restaurant. This courtesy Marvin would have declined, but did not because he feared he could not do it gracefully enough not to wound his new acquaintance.

He was delighted with the new arrangement and with his new friend. He began to have a kindlier feeling toward his fellow, and to venture out of himself. Perhaps he was mistaken after all, and had judged humanity on too little evidence. Anyway, life began to take on brighter colors, and for a long time he looked back to that first night in the bachelor's apartment as one of the memorable ones in his life—it marked the beginning of a new order of things.

CHAPTER III.

The sweltering days of August glared themselves out over the city. Everyone who could hied them to mountain and seashore. But Marvin found his fifth-story apartment delightfully pleasant, and the summer months had been the most fruitful of his stay in the city. Soon after he settled, Mr. Donham went to the coast of Maine and temporarily he had been left monarch of all he surveyed. Mr. Donald had advised him not to place any more pictures on view till the fall exhibits opened and art-lovers returned to town, so he had put in the days painting, and the nights drifting about the streets into all kinds of out-of-the-way places.

September slipped by, and early in October he received a note from Miss Wondells informing him of her return and asking him to call.

Miss Wondells was not a beauty. She was tall, muscular and blonde. Her eyes were purple and prominent; mouth self-confident and aggressive. Her age was dubious, but easily nearing the forty mark. But there was a kindliness in her manner that pleased him. She came forward and took his hand cordially.

"Why, Mr. Garner," she said, looking him over thoughtfully, "you are just as I pictured you."

"I suppose I should say thank you?"

"Why, of course."

"Thank you."

When they were seated they fell to discussing "Miserere" and the "Blizzard." Then in a lull in the conversation he said:

"I suppose your father is a great churchworker, Miss Wondells?"

She burst into a hearty laugh. "That's a good joke," she explained. "I will have to tell father. He hasn't been in a church for years."

"Oh," gasped Marvin, "I beg your pardon. You know he publishes religious books and the 'Sermon Maker' and 'The Pastor's Helper,' and I always had an idea that he must be a very religious man."

"Quite naturally, I suppose. And I guess he once was. Papa began life as a clergyman, you know; then he took up law, now he is a publisher. Odd, isn't it?"

"Then he isn't religious now?"

She had to laugh again. "Well, you might call it that, though not in the sense you mean, perhaps. At present he seems to fluctuate between Ethical Culture and Spiritualism. The seance seems to be his fad just at this moment. Last year it was Theosophy. Mother says it will be Christian Science next, or New

Thought, unless something newer turns up in the meantime."

"But your father believes in the Church?"

"Well, I'm sure he ought to—he makes his money out of it. But I'm not sure he's interested further than that. He says most of the city churches are little more than fashionable clubs. Rich men give to them as a kind of concession to their consciences, and their wives and daughters run societies for the improvement of—everything in sight. I'm sure, though, they must do quite a good work among the poor in the way of charity, but father says it could be done better and cheaper by the city. I'm sure I'm not competent to pass on the matter. I know New York is dotted with churches of every faith and description. I guess most people have to have that kind of thing, especially the women—and it makes it nice for papa. Why, he spent \$100,000 preparing the Standard Church Encyclopedia before a copy was sold—I was awfully afraid it was a risky undertaking. Well, it sold by the millions. You know, a great many people will buy anything that is supposed to be religious if it is bound attractively enough. I suppose I ought to be an ardent church member and a woman of great faith, but, you know, I was educated abroad, in Paris and Berlin, and I've never cared for such things."

"What is your religion?" asked Marvin.

"Grand opera and art. But I beg your pardon, Mr.

Garner, I hope I have not offended you—I forgot that you might be a church member.”

“No, I don’t even believe in a God. When I did I cursed and defied him. Now it amuses me to think I ever had that much faith in the old superstitions.”

“Oh, how dreadful—and dangerous,” she cried in mock alarm. “Are you not afraid of some terrible judgment—that you’ll be struck suddenly blind? lose your right hand in a street-car accident, or something awful like that? You know it used to happen that way.”

“It may again. Not as a judgment from or the influence of any mythological supreme being, but as a result of natural causes.”

“Why, you almost shock me. I thought you green from the West—unsophisticated—and—and I find you’ve already developed beyond the New Thought. Perhaps you might convert papa and myself to your ideas. You know I’ve been dabbling in New Thought a little to please my friends. It is so comforting, if one can only persuade oneself to believe it—that all the good things you may desire will tumble into your lap if only you pray for and think of them hard enough.”

“Oh, that’s all right. But one would get the same results praying to the sun or his solar plexus. I often pray to my mother and my own soul. It satisfies the superstitious instinct, and then I find it helps me. It

keeps one's courage up and refreshes his egotism quite as much as if he believed the great Creator was personally interested in his small affairs and listening to his selfish petitions. I consider that the supreme egotism. But it's good for those who like it, I suppose. I have no desire to interfere with the other fellow's belief if he'll let me alone with mine. I've concluded one's religion is mostly a matter of temperament, shape of the head, early influences and experiences, as in mine; or education, as in yours."

"How original—and how refreshing. Shake," she said, stepping over and offering her hand. He rose and clasped it firmly. As they stood thus, laughing in mutual understanding and good fellowship, their eyes met. Marvin's face went red and fell to the floor.

"Let me hear you play that Shubert—what you call it—you said I reminded you of," he said, recovering himself, dropping her hand.

Miss Wondells was proud of her playing, and sat down to the piano. Marvin sank into the embrace of soft cushions and listened; watched her hands move above the black and white keys and thought of the wings of birds. The music seemed to drip, flow, gush; fall in gentle showers from her finger-tips. Then he forgot to watch her hands, became unconscious of the player, carried out of himself by waves of melody that vibrated to the very depth of his soul;

that thrilled and moved him unaccountably; filling his imagination with vivid pictures—grand, fantastic, tragic, pathetic. His emotions seemed to find expression in images. He closed his eyes and yielded himself to the vibrant panorama that swept through his brain. He felt as if he had suddenly come into a new world—the world of which he had dreamed. Then there flashed upon him that strange feeling that he had lived through it all before—as he had gazed on the limitless stretches of the prairie — into the sunset sky.

There was an abrupt silence. He looked up. Miss Wondells sat before the piano motionless, her hands limp in her lap, gazing into space abstractedly, her cheeks pale. She seemed to have forgotten his presence.

“Grand,” he cried enthusiastically. “I can’t express how you moved me.”

“I thought you’d like it,” she replied, smiling up at him, animation sweeping into her cheeks.

“And that’s what you think of me?”

“No; not exactly that—I can’t explain. But somehow when I think of you I associate you with that impromptu.”

“I think I understand. You see in melody just as I feel in pictures. As you played I saw myself as a boy again, stretched on the grass watching the flight of swallows against the pale afterglow, the hushed

note of a lone bird rising from the shadowy tree-tops, and above, a crescent moon on a pale-green sky."

"Oh, thank you, how beautiful. I think this would express you in some of your moods—it's Beethoven." When she turned and looked into his eyes no words of his were needed to tell her how he had enjoyed it. She smiled her thanks and whispered, "Liszt," as her hands like sentient things plunged into the passionate bars of "Mephisto Waltzer."

"Oh, that's fine. Pshaw," he cried impatiently, rising and standing by her. "You'll think I don't appreciate your playing—I can't express it—I never heard anything like it—I could listen always."

"Thank you. I'm so glad you like music—I was sure you would. Your pictures are music in colors—Wagner, Beethoven, Chopin——"

A maid entered with refreshments.

"I hope you won't mind. Mother thinks when two or three are gathered together, as the Prayer Book says—morning, noon or night—it's an occasion for tea. So you'll have to make up your mind to like tea if you wish ma's good opinion. This is some a high official recommended to father when we were travelling in China."

"Oh, I'm fond of tea."

"How kind of you to say so. I'll tell mother."

"But I really am."

"Why, of course you are, but I am not. I like art better. Tell me about your new pictures."

Then as they faced each other across the dainty tea-table with its embroidered linen and eggshell china, he told her of his exhibition and "At the Edge of the Prairie."

"Let me congratulate you. It is wonderful. Don't you know, I have friends down at the Salmagundi who have never done anything in their lives but study art—here and abroad—and have painted and painted, and with all their wealth and friends and influence have not had half your success. Why, you've arrived. I told mamma that the 'Blizzard' was great—I'm so glad my judgment is confirmed. And my note was the first recognition of your work?"

"Yes, in the city."

"Why, that makes me feel almost as proud as if I had painted the 'Blizzard' myself. You know, the next thing to being a genius is being able to appreciate one."

When Marvin rose to go it was past twelve. Miss Wondells walked with him to the elevator and smiled and waved to him till he passed from sight.

Some hours later he sat at his fifth-story window, reclining in Donham's Morris chair, gazing out across the Hudson, where the night boats shot great caverns of light into the night. He sat for a long time wondering, thinking, dreaming. Presently his thoughts

drifted backward, and a strange longing touched his spirit. There came to him an acrid yearning for something his life did not possess. His head sank to his arm and lay motionless. A cool breeze swept into the room, rustling the papers on the table; the clock ticked noiselessly; from the the street rose the increasing rumble of the waking city.

There was a faint clack, and the door swung softly open. Marvin started up. A shadowy form tiptoed into the room.

"Hello, Garner, what you doing up this time of morning? I've been making a regular cracksman's entry so's not to disturb your beauty sleep——"

"It's very kind of you, Mr. Donham, but I have been in only a short while."

"Oh, I see, you are getting to be a regular night owl—well, how are you?"

CHAPTER IV.

It was the season of art exhibits, sales and auctions. "At the Edge of the Prairie" had been an attraction for some days in Donald's show-window. During the time groups of the curious could be seen standing before it at almost any hour. The art critics had accorded it warm praise and already the artist's name was becoming known among a coterie of art dealers and collectors. The individual who had patronized Marvin's first sale so liberally, and who still withheld his name, had offered five hundred dollars for the new picture. While it was more than Marvin expected to realize, Mr. Donald advised that he let it remain on view some days longer before closing the deal. Then one night at the auction of a private collection at Mendelssohn Hall, with his friend Donham, a bold scheme occurred to him. The possibilities it opened up to his fancy for a moment turned him cold. The idea had its inception in the sale of a small canvas by Mauve, "The Return from the Pasture," that had been knocked down at \$11,000. He knew that while the picture was great, intrinsically it was not worth the money, and in spite of the fame of the artist would

not have commanded it had it not been for the spirit of rivalry and recklessness engendered by the bidding. He believed his picture was just as great in a different way, and presently found himself speculating as to the effect it would have upon the art-lovers if unexpectedly brought before them. Then flashed into his mind the scheme to compass it. It seemed so wild, so impractical, that he did not dare mention it for some days. But finding that he could not get away from the idea, he called on Mr. Sills, the auctioneer and manager of the sales, and unfolded his plan. That gentleman was disposed to dissuade him from his purpose, kindly hinting that it would likely be disappointing. But Marvin was determined, and upon his advancing an amount to cover the expense of handling the picture, a satisfactory arrangement was consummated.

It was some days until the evening of the next auction, which was to be the collection of a noted connoisseur. When it was too late to turn back, Marvin was seized with a panic of fear, and grew restless and impatient. Sunday came and Donham asked him to attend the Church of St. Mary the Virgin. He had not been to church during his stay in the city, and partially to please his friend, who had regularly invited him, more to dispose of the time, he consented. He had often wondered what his pleasure-loving, time-killing friend found so attractive in the church ser-

vices to cause him to be so faithful in his attendance. He seldom missed a service, frequently getting up before day that he might be present at some early ceremony. At these times he took no breakfast and had asked Marvin not to speak to him until his return. To take food or talk was supposed to annul in some mysterious way the full efficacy of this matutinal rite. Marvin had not expressed his religious views and had refrained from commenting on his friend's. Any confidence or information on the subject had been listened to in silence or dismissed with the simple statement that he was not competent to pass on the matter.

The spectacular worship of St. Mary's appealed to him in the same way that a novel theatrical performance would. The worship he had been used to was of the simplest form. He had gone through no training to prepare him for the extreme contrast. It was impossible for him to realize that he was in a church, that this was supposed to be a Christian service. He found himself wondering how men could evolve this kind of thing from Christ's teaching. He could not believe that Christ ever dreamed of the possibility of such ritualistic ceremonies in his name; would be confounded if he could behold them. He thought the music beautiful, though not as good as he had heard at the opera, and he rather enjoyed the singsong intonation of the priests and the censer calesthenics of the acolytes, who seemed to be going through some

strenuous disinfectant process. The procession, headed by a chief performer, whose superfluities of robes required the "eternal vigilance" of two assistants, reminded him of cheap stage processions of tawdry royalty. He knew it all was supposed to be a high act of worship and was symbolical of beautiful thoughts and attitudes of soul; but what perplexed him was that intelligent men should think an intelligent God was pleased at such florid incantations or complimented at such a waste of time and incense. God at least must be an ideal man, infinitely superior to him in character, and he could not conceive of a man worthy respect and reverence being gratified at such mummery. One impulse, thought or act toward a righteous life would mean more to the God he once believed in than volcanoes of incense, emporiums of vestments and multitudes of priests genuflecting to operatic music.

He was puzzled at his friend's intense devotional attitude. He seemed lifted out of himself—overcome by some mystical exaltation. He could not question that he believed in it with all his heart, that it appealed to him strongly—esthetically, spectacularly, dramatically. He could not fathom in which way. He recalled the religious frenzies he had witnessed in the meetings under brush arbors. It was a long cry from one to the other, but he felt that they both had their origin in the senses, were unchristian, and

did not necessarily influence character. The ignorant fanatic would have viewed the worship of the cultured ritualist as heathenish, and the ritualist would have looked upon the fanatic's orgies as savagery; but both alike were still in the kindergarten of religion. But he had no feelings of contempt or condemnation. This was the only thing possible for these people. As well get indignant at a child because it could not comprehend geometry as to find fault with them. If it appealed to them, helped them, why should they not have it? So he broadened as he came into wider observation, experience, knowledge. The clergyman's remarks, however, provoked within him a passing antagonism. It was short, but an ardently dogmatic exhortation on the necessity and beneficence of confession. To Marvin it was the extreme of egotism to believe the Creator was personally interested in the individual, but for man to insist and teach that he was a special agent of deity, and was necessary in the dispensation of His grace, mercies and forgivenesses, was a miracle of presumption and blasphemy. His order of mind was such that the idea was unthinkable. He had to accept this differing intelligence, or the absence of it, as he did life, the world, and other mysteries. They were here and there was no satisfactory explanation for them.

"Well, how did you like the service?" asked Don-

ham, as they turned from the throng and walked toward Broadway.

"I enjoyed it very much, and I am glad you brought me with you. I never saw anything like it—the music was fine."

"Father Fulstian is great. I think sometime he must be inspired. No other clergyman in the city could do it. You ought to attend a High Celebration—I tell you it is great."

"It was very entertaining."

They had reached Broadway when a voice reached them from an uncertain direction.

"Hello, Donham." They stopped and soon sighted a tall, thin man in a Prince Albert leisurely approaching them. Marvin thought he must be a clergyman and instinctively shrank from an introduction.

"Glad to see you back, Hayers," said Donham, as they shook hands. "Let me introduce you to my friend Garner—the artist I was telling you of."

They crossed Broadway toward the Marlsborough.

"Had your dinner?" asked Hayers. "Well, you'll dine with me," he said, upon receiving a negative. He led the way into the hotel, and they entered the dining-room.

"I see you are up to your old tricks, Donham," said Hayers, when they were seated and the orders given. "Proselyting to high church. Oh, you needn't deny it—I can smell it on your clothes. But I guess

you need a good fumigation occasionally, though I'm afraid it doesn't get any deeper than your Sunday suit—unless it gives you a holy influenza."

"Now, don't begin your blasphemy, Hayers; Mr. Garner may not understand you."

"You high church, Mr. Garner?"

"I don't belong to a church."

"Oh, good; then you'll understand. You've learned to think. These church people"——"

"Don't believe half he says, Garner; he pays a thousand a year for a pew in St. Thomas."

"And haven't been in it since I learned to think. I'm a Christian, not a churchman. No intelligent Christian can remain a good churchman——"

"I admire your modesty——"

"It isn't modesty, it's simply the truth. No; there's not a church, and I've looked into them all, that stands for Christ, pure and simple. Their teaching and practice is a travesty on His life——"

"You forget that the church existed before Christ?"

"No; I remember, and that it fixed His divinity, passed upon the canon of inspiration and still insists that it alone can interpret it. If we accept that theory, it means that a set of uninspired men, for the most part ignorant, wholly so, in the light of present-day knowledge, determined what was inspiration. Men are as wise now as when Constantine called the Fathers together and dominated and browbeat them

into a statement of the faith. Why not a new set of men pass on inspiration and faith to-day? Inspiration is nothing more than the highest ideals of the wisest and best of any age. Christ was a great and good man, but a superstitious age made Him a God. Let an intelligent, scientific age restore Him to His true place, then people who think will be attracted to the church, and it will not be given over to women and effeminate men——”

“You know, Hayers, that all the best people are in the church?”

“And the worst. That’s the very point I make—it doesn’t mean anything. It’s nothing more than a powerful club people join to further some selfish end. Why one already feels suspicious of a man if he teaches in a Sunday School or passes an alms basin. If the old theories are true why don’t the clergy stick to the mechanical formula—as Christ died for all men, all men will be saved, and let it rest there. But they condition and limit His work in order that they may get a finger in the pie. So men are lost, if you listen to them, unless they believe a creed made by man, are baptized by man, confirmed by man, confessed by man, communed by man, buried by man, none of which Christ did or taught. But they are wiser in their generation than was Christ. He had not where to lay his head and was crucified because He put to shame and condemned the church; now His

professed representatives live in luxury, wear purple and fine linen and dine sumptuously every day. They cry out against unrighteousness in the pulpit and the brethren in the pew cry amen—and they all go out and worship at the shrine of mammon six days in the week, yes——”

“You are just talking, Hayers, and you know it.”

“Yes; talking facts. The trouble is they hopelessly confuse morals, religion and salvation. The latter, so far as the future is concerned, is nothing but a speculation. They teach that if you go through a certain process here you are saved from hell hereafter; when, in fact, you may not be either religious or moral. Then there’s no more virtue in being religious than in being musical. It’s a matter of temperament, and is no guarantee of a correct life. You know you are very religious and you know you have no morals to speak of. You think high mass, incense, and confession to a gouty, high-living old priest will even things up. No; there’s no such a thing as the salvation taught in the churches. Every man saves himself—Christ, the church, civilization, counts for little unless a man knows right and tries to live the right he knows.”

“The truth is, Hayers, you don’t know what you believe; and the more you talk the more befuddled you get.”

“You mustn’t mind my harangue, Mr. Garner. If

I didn't give Donham a rounding-up occasionally, he would backslide. He takes a kind of pride in my free-thinking ideas. It makes him feel safe and comfortable in his cussed piousness to hear me blaspheme, as he calls it."

"Oh, you're all right as long as you keep talking. Men who have fixed convictions are men who seldom seek occasion to air them," said Donham, winking at Marvin.

"By the way, Hayers, how much did you give that clergyman you said had written you for a donation?"

"I'm glad you mentioned that. I invited him to come down. I wanted value received for my money. I gave him two thousand dollars and he took two bottles of port. He drank wine like a fish drinks water. But he agreed to everything I said. I have never found so easy a convert. He acknowledged that the creed was a statement of an ignorant, superstitious age; that educated people no longer believed in the miraculous birth; that Christ was the natural son of Joseph, or otherwise he would be illegitimate; that Holy Ghost was symbolical language and meant simply love—love overpowered Mary, he read it; that divinity as applied to Christ meant only a righteous ideal. But he told me one thing I didn't know. He said there was a St. Joseph Society in the church that had for its chief tenets the statements I have just made——"

“You are joking, Hayers——”

“No; I repeat what he said; but when a man gets on the outside of two bottles of port you can expect him to say things—and a man ought to say things for two thousand dollars. Then he’ll find it easy to absolve himself, and it’s rather difficult to pick up two thousand dollars every day. I’m not holding it against him. He earned his money so far as I am concerned.”

“Well, I’m not going to argue with you. By the way, you must come over to Mendlesshon Hall Friday night,” said Donham, changing the subject. “Mr. Garner is going to spring a sensation. His picture is going to be put up at auction during the Peyster sale. You must be there and try a bid.”

“Why, yes, I will. I’m glad you mentioned it. Beg your pardon, Mr. Garner, you never expressed your religious views, or perhaps I ought to say that I didn’t give you an opportunity.”

“Oh, about the only belief I have is that every belief is the correct one for the person believing it.”

“Well, you are liberal, at any rate.”

“Yes, I think I’m liberal.”

CHAPTER V.

Mendleshon Hall was packed with the artistic elite of the city. The sale had been extensively advertised and when Marvin and his friends arrived the auditorium was already filled. Some had come with the hope of securing a noted canvas; others that they might add to their collection a picture from that of the late Senator Peyster's, they were not particular about the kind of picture or the reputation of the artist; but the large majority were dealers, art lovers and the curious, who had come to buy, view the pictures and enjoy the excitement incident to a sale of this kind.

"Hello, there's Curgan. I wonder what he's after?" said Donham, pointing out a late arrival, who was making his way to a reserved seat.

"Well, I guess he'll get what he came after," returned Hayers. "He could buy the whole collection, if it struck his fancy."

It seemed the auctioneer had been waiting for Curgan, for he now mounted the platform and began his announcements. There was a sudden silence, followed by a brisk rustling sound as the leaves of many

catalogues were turned. The first picture was a small pastoral by McCord, and, after a little skirmish of bidding, was knocked down for seventy-five dollars.

"A ridiculously low price," insisted Mr. Sills. "If that canvas had some foreigner's name tacked to it—isky or itti—it would easily bring five hundred dollars. Yes, if an American artist wants to sell his pictures, let him adopt a foreign name—the harder to pronounce the better."

The sale went on lively, the auctioneer provoking the bidders into occasional ripples of mirth by his interpolated witticisms. Once an assistant put a seascape upside down on the easel. Mr. Sills, taking his cue from the catalogue, rattled on glibly: "'A Windy Day off Cape Cod'—a fine bit of sea and sky—remarkable coloring—you seem to feel the cool breeze blowing inland—observe the motion of the water. A unique canvas by one of America's most noted painters. Everybody will have at any cost a canvas by Richards—what am I bid?—I wait your pleasure, gentlemen."

Some one noticed the blunder and began to clap his hands. This provoked a general applause, though many failing to understand why. The auctioneer turned quickly to the picture. It was a second before he perceived the trouble, but it did not disturb him in the least, and he went on blandly, "Ah, you see, gentlemen, still a picture, though reversed. Art will

tell—the highest test of skill—turn it how you will—the picture's there still. Beg your pardon, not meaning to drop into poetry."

The picture was righted.

"What am I offered for this seascape—a perfect gem—fifty dollars—thank you—going—going——"

As the sale proceeded, Marvin grew uneasy and nervous. He did not know at what moment his picture might be offered, and the last incident filled him with apprehension. Suppose it should suit the whim of Mr. Sills to hold his picture up to ridicule? He excused himself and found a seat in a remote corner. Here he had been a long time it seemed to him, anxiously checking the pictures on the list as they were disposed of, when he caught the words: "The next canvas, gentlemen, you'll not find in the catalogue. It is a picture we have been asked to sell to-night purely on its merits. The artist requesting that his name be withheld till after the sale. I have no word of commendation or condemnation—judge for yourselves."

Marvin shrank back into his seat, his heart beating like a trip-hammer; there was a throbbing in his ears that almost deafened him. He closed his eyes; there was a moment of expectant silence as the crowd waited the appearance of the picture; then it burst simultaneously into applause. Marvin trembled as if overcome by some great shock; he opened his eyes

fearfully and glanced toward the stage. Through the frame of red plush curtains, miles and miles of sunlit prairie lay before him; limitless distances led the eye on to illusive peaks that lifted like shadowy cloud masses against the far-off horizon; above, glistened the bright noonday sky, clear, blue, of infinite depths. Across it moved boiling white clouds, their shadows on the landscape so life-like one expected to see them flit along the canvas. In one corner rose the outline of a dug-out against a fringe of cotton-woods, and a plowman in the open breaking sod. As a picture it was compelling, but it was the intangible something that it suggested that held the thoughtful observer. Here was thought, emotion, wrought out in color, no mere trick of hand or brush. It was Nature in its elemental round of vital activity—moving calmly, beautifully, inevitably toward its end, propelled by the law within it. Man was but a part of the great scheme, insignificant in his setting—an atom set adrift between the great blue ocean that stretched above him and the limitless green one that spread its gigantic dimensions beneath his feet. He, too, followed the law within, battling here alone with the greater, colossal, irresistible forces that played upon him from without.

“Five hundred dollars,” cried a voice above the applause. “Six hundred.” “Seven hundred.” Steadily the bidding rose till it reached six thousand, then

the auctioneer's voice rang out in the tense quiet, "Going, going, gone!"—and Marvin knew that he had a market. There was a keen thrill of exultation that comes to a few once in a lifetime, but it is a passing, evanescent glow of spirit; it is never satisfied—it creates a hunger for what it feeds on. He was planning greater achievements before the applause died in his ear. Truly the soul of the ambitious is always to be, but never blest. Caught up in a fresh flight of his fancy, he already viewed his triumph as a thing of long ago; became oblivious of his surroundings. He had lost interest in the sale, and thought it a favoring time to make his escape. He hurried toward the door. Here he was intercepted. "Oh, Mr. Garner," some one called; "there are some gentlemen who would like to speak to you." Before he could realize what it meant, he found himself jostled into an ante-room and was experiencing the acme of nineteenth century fame—an interview. A half dozen reporters were plying him with questions. But he did not mind. He knew that these men could do more in the next twelve hours to make him a reputation than all the unaided efforts of a lifetime. That thousands would read their lurid reports and flock to gaze at his canvases who only yesterday passed them with unseeing glance. He had thought it out long ago. Perhaps there was a little of Barnum in his philosophy; and his reflections on the success of

the patent medicine "ad" had also helped him to his conclusion. The American people were slow to recognize merit, but quick to reward notoriety. He had meant to combine the two, he had succeeded. But it now seemed to him very foolish that the public should care to know about his personal habits, his past life, how he happened to become a painter—how he dressed, ate, slept, and a thousand other insignificant things. But he knew they would find more satisfaction reading about him as a man who had sold a canvas for six thousand dollars than in the art of his pictures. The money value of his art gave it merit, gave him distinction in the mind of the crowd. So he answered questions graciously with all due modesty, knowing full well the consequences, and the consequences were not disappointing. The papers the next morning blazed with catch-the-eye headlines: "A Cowboy Artist's Jump into Fame," "An Artistic Coup," "An Unknown Western Painter Takes Fifth Avenue by Storm."

The week was largely given up to interviewers and photographers. For some months, Sunday editions and monthlies bristled with his portrait and reproductions of his noted picture. Soon the shop windows were filled with cheap lithographs of himself and his canvas—were scattered broadcast over the country. He was the artistic hit of the season. Orders rolled in that would take him years to fill. There was but

one thing for him to do—work while his star was in the ascendant.

“When Marvin called on Mr. Sills and asked for the name of the purchaser of “At the Edge of the Prairie” and learned that it was Mr. Laramore, a queer expression came onto his face.

“Who is Mr. Laramore?” he asked.

“Why, everybody knows Mr. Laramore. He’s a wealthy philanthropist, and has to his credit the discovery of more geniuses than any other man in New York. It’s a kind of hobby with him.”

“Thank you,” said Marvin. He turned and walked thoughtfully into the street.

CHAPTER VI.

A few days after the incidents just recorded, Marvin called on Miss Wondells. He had an engagement to accompany her to the opera to hear a new singer who was to make her debut in America. They had become good chums by this time, and she received him in mock awe.

"Mr. Noted Artist, I think you might have given your friends an opportunity to share your triumph," she said, deprecatingly.

"I was not sure it would not be a humiliation."

"But your friends would have been glad to share that. You will become a regular lion, now—but you won't forget your old friends, will you?"

"I don't think I'd find much pleasure in being a lion, if I might. And I haven't so many friends that I can afford to forget even one," he said, a little sadly.

"I don't think you appreciate your fame. You don't enthuse a bit."

"Fame, as you call it, is something to look forward to—it's somehow unsatisfying in the attainment."

She looked at him questioningly for an instant and said: "Mr. Garner, may I ask you a question—a

personal question—I've often wished to. Now, that we are such old friends, you won't mind?"

"Why, I'll be glad for you to ask me anything—you care to."

"I've—I've had a suspicion that your life has not been happy—that you've had some hard experiences—there—I hope I do not offend you?"

"No, you do not offend. I'm not sensitive—that way, and I have had some unhappy experiences," he said calmly.

"Oh, I was sure you had. That's one reason I wrote you. I told mother you had suffered—you couldn't have painted the 'Blizzard' if you had not. I am glad you have arrived and that it is all over. Tell me about it, if you don't mind?"

"If you'd really care—but you'd find it very uninteresting, I fear."

"I'm sure I would not."

Marvin was glad of this opportunity to confide in some one. To-night he was in a reminiscent mood. A reaction had set in from the late elation. As he looked back it all seemed so futile. He found that he still was the same old self, carried about with him the same sad, hungry, restless world within. His parents could never know of his success, possibly would not approve if they could, and it seemed that he was no nearer the realization of the secret hope that had led him to the city, the hope that had made

his art a means to an end. So it was with a kind of melancholy pleasure that he gave his friend bits of his life from the time of his first visit to New York up to the last, omitting only reference to his meetings with the Laramores. In concluding he said: "It doesn't seem possible that I am the same person that five years ago was picking cotton on a little farm in Texas."

"Oh, how you must have suffered," cried Miss Mabel. "And did no one in all that time give you a word of encouragement?"

Marvin looked at his companion a moment questioningly. Perhaps it would be best to confide in her fully. She might be able to advise him as to his future course. "Yes, there was a gentleman and his daughter. They live in the city—it was he that bought my pictures." Then he told of their meeting in Texas, of the visits to his attic studio, of Miss Laramore's ambitions.

"And the young lady—has she returned?"

"I do not know—I have not tried to communicate with them. It is about that I would like your advice."

"You would like to meet Miss Laramore?"

"I would."

A sudden illumination came into Miss Mabel's face, causing it to pale. She quickly recovered. "Mr. Garner, I think I know what the trouble is now—why

your success is disappointing. You are in love—with Miss Laramore?"

Marvin looked up quickly.

"I am—more than I can tell. It's the only thing that seems worth while," he said earnestly. "You are my friend—tell me what I must do?"

Miss Wondells was conscious of a strange sensation at the heart, of dismissing forever possibilities that had been pleasant. She sat a moment very quiet, looking on the floor as if considering an answer to the other's question. Then she rose. "We must be going—we'll be late if we don't hurry. We will talk it over on the way," she said in an even voice. But Marvin thought he detected an almost imperceptible restraint in her manner that caused him to wonder. Could it be possible that she cared?

"What you must do is to write Mr. Laramore thanking him for the interest he has taken in you. He will then likely invite you to call if he desires to renew the acquaintance," she said, sinking back comfortably in the cab. "Miss Laramore may have returned. You could hardly expect her to write you or make any advances. I'm sure, though, she's still interested—perhaps thinks more of you than you suspect; yet it is possible she has forgotten you—six years is a long time for a girl to remember a passing acquaintance."

They were late in reaching the opera house. As

they settled in their seats the curtain went up, revealing a wonderful woodland scene; the German king on his throne, holding court. It was a bit of medieval world, suggestive of wild revels—comedy, tragedy. The swell of the orchestration, the deep baritone voices, now rising clear, vibrant, now blending in unison with the instruments, pulsed through the wide spaces. Below, in dim outline, could be caught glimpses of white shoulders, exquisite costumes, a multitude of heads, here and there quivering jewels like fireflies in passage.

Marvin remembered how he had been moved the first time he heard grand opera; but to-night he found himself listening indifferently. Then he fell to criticizing the scenery, insisting that the scene-painter was a real artist; that people did not value him as they should. Finally he turned to the singers and began to give attention. "When does the new singer, Miss Darmstad, come on? She's Elsa, is she not?—she's——"

"She's coming now — listen — the king summons her." Marvin turned his eyes toward the wing expectantly. A sudden, strange presentiment seized him. What if it should be she? "What is her real name?—Miss Dreamstad's——"

"I don't know — look — that's she — that's Elsa. Isn't she beautiful? Listen, she's going to sing."

Marvin's eyes were riveted on the prima donna,

who now stood with head drooping sorrowfully before the king. There was a swift quickening of the pulses, followed by a sickening disappointment. It could not be she. How could that lovely woman be the girl he had told good-bye beneath the summer blaze in the cotton-field? Then she began to sing—in a limpid, flute-like voice she told with simple pathos the story of her vision. Marvin leaned forward eagerly, forgetting everything but the voice—it brought back vividly the day he painted at the edge of the wood, the meeting in the depths of the trees, the day in the attic, the white cotton-field, the yellow sunshine. It was the same voice—it was she.

Miss Wondells noticed his rapt, ecstatic look. "You recognize her?" she whispered.

"Yes, I'm sure—it's Miss Laramore. I could never forget that voice."

"How wonderful—how romantic. You must let her know. Listen. She is great—she'll make a hit—wait till she goes off."

Marvin straightened up. He must master his emotions. He felt an insane impulse to shout her name, to cast himself headlong toward her. Every word that dropped from her lips sent vibrant waves tingling through his body. When she at last came to the prayer song, he was moved uncontrollably. He bowed his face in his hands—felt the hot tears trickling down his cheeks. Then the curtain rolled to;

the lights flashed up; the house burst into a storm of applause. His companion was frantically clapping her hands, waving her handkerchief, fan.

"She's made a hit—she's made a hit. They'll force her to give an encore. Yes; the curtain is going up." Her hands dropped limp into her lap, and she sank back panting. "Oh, it's foolish to go crazy like this—but how can you help it? She's great—I'm so glad. There she is—listen." Elsa repeated the prayer song; then the applause was terrific. Again and again she was called before the curtain, nor would the crowd desist till wearied into silence. A hush fell on the house, then it broke into a babel of voices; the men, like strange beetles, began to move in a steady stream toward the foyer.

"Send in your card—write something that will remind her—hurry—you'll have plenty time——"

"Would you—would you——"

"Hurry—hurry—she'll be glad."

Thus urged, Marvin wrote on his card: "Dear Prima Donna, If you remember the old oak tree, the cotton pen, the attic and a Texas artist, he would be honored to renew the acquaintance," found an usher and sent it to her.

He hastened back to Miss Mabel in a fever of excitement, anxiety. To hide his agitation he flung himself recklessly into conversation. Small talk came hard to him, but he now forced himself to it.

The intermission seemed like hours. At last the curtain rose on the next act. At the close there was again prolonged applause, encores, and the final fall of the curtain. Then Marvin's heart jumped into his mouth, he was conscious of waves of heat encircling his body, as he saw an usher approaching. He grasped the note, and read: "Yes, I remember. How kind of you to recognize me. The bearer will conduct you to me at the end of the next act."

He handed it to Miss Wondells. "Oh, how very wonderful," she cried when she had glanced it over; "and how lovely of her."

At last he rose to go; "I won't be long," he told Miss Wondells, reassuringly.

"Good luck—good-bye," she said encouragingly.

Following the guide through interminable passages, he at length was ushered into a dressing-room. Miss Laramore and a gentleman, whom he recognized as her father, stood waiting him.

"How kind of you," she said in a voice that sounded like heavenly music, offering her hand. Marvin grasped it, pressed it passionately, cruelly, forgetting himself, her father.

"And how good of you," he returned ardently.

"You remember papa? This is Mr. Garner, papa—the artist we met in Texas."

"I am glad to meet you again, Mr. Garner. I see

in the papers that you are not disappointing my expectations."

"And I owe what little success I have had to you, though I have known it only the last few weeks. I thank you sincerely, Mr. Laramore."

"Mildred enjoyed your coup at Mendelssohn—that was a great idea."

"And I have my revenge to-night, Miss Mildred. You've had a great triumph. I wish I could find words to congratulate you."

Mr. Laramore became interested in some stage property just outside the door. And the two, left, alone, fell silent for a minute. Then they looked up frankly into each other's eyes. They knew now that they loved each other. It was as if the compelling intelligence flashed from soul to soul.

"Miss Mildred, it is so good of you," he repeated a little indefinitely, but earnestly enough.

"And so kind of you," returned Miss Mildred, equally indefinitely and earnestly.

Then conversation became easy. "Can't you dine with father and me after the opera?" she asked presently.

"I'm afraid not—I'd be glad to—but I'm with a friend——"

"Why, bring him along—we'll be glad to have him join us——"

"Oh—it's —it's——"

"Well, bring him. We'll wait for you at the stage entrance on Thirty-ninth Street—there's the signal—good-bye."

As Marvin was telling Miss Mabel good-night, he felt a sudden uneasy tenderness for her; seemed to realize how kind she had been to him, and felt a sense of guilt as if he had not been grateful.

"Miss Mabel," he said impulsively; "how good and kind you are. How can I ever show my appreciation—I do appreciate——"

There was a smile—a pathetic, understanding smile on her lips as she answered with gentle fervor: "We'll just continue to be good friends. I'm so glad you've found Miss Laramore. Good night."

She stood as on the night of his first visit and smiled and waved to him as the elevator dropped from sight. Then she stood some minutes longer staring into the empty space.

CHAPTER VII.

A soft radiance still lingered low on the west—a halo above a lone black peak that here lifted its scraggy head—when the carriage turned from the steep ascent and stopped for a moment on the brow of Devil’s Backbone. The occupants were evidently interested in the scene that spread around them, for the man directed the attention of his companion to different points of the view. It was Marvin bringing his wife to the scene of his boyhood.

The face of the landscape had not changed. There were the same fields, the same hills, the same yawning gullies and ravines. Diamond, the same ragged village, set on its high perch, indifferently, imperturbably. Somewhere in the dark the yelping of a vigilant dog announced their arrival on the one desolate street. Here and there a figure bulked against the dim light of an open door, a head darkened a window.

The carriage stopped before Aunt Molly’s cottage—the only home that Marvin could remember. He was surprised to see lights streaming from the windows and doors, and when he cried out the accustoméd “Hello!” these were magically filled with

peering faces. A tall, bearded man came to the gate and greeted him.

"Does Aunt Molly live here?" asked Marvin.

"Not any more, I hope," said the man; "she's been dead over a year." As the other remained silent, he added: "Thought maybe you wanted something at the store?"

"No; who lives here?"

"Me—Bill Hinkle."

"Bill Hinkle, once of Whiterock?"

"Well, I guess you'r right. I moved from there 'bout three year ago."

"Do you remember Parson Garner?"

"Well, I should say so. Whiterock never had anything like him before er since. But you'll not find him yere—nobody ain't heard from him since his folks died, seven er eight years ago. He went to New York to go into the picher bizness."

"Hinkle, don't you know me?"

The other stepped back so that the light would fall on the stranger.

"No, darned if I do. I've been wonderin' who it could be that knowed me at Whiterock."

"I'm Garner."

"You ain't Parson Garner?"

"No; just plain Garner."

"Well, I'm darned—beggin' yer pardon, lady—I'd never knowed you with the beard. Come right in.

It shore do beat the Jews, you turnin' up this way. Never expected to set eyes on you agin."

"This is my wife."

"I'm shore powerful glad to see her—fetch her right in."

That night, sitting out in the moonlight, the grey valley yawning beneath them, stretching mystically to the black jagged line that lifted on the steely sky, Marvin learned how Hinkle had moved into the village, bought his father's old store, and, when Aunt Molly became helpless, had bought the home and cared for her until she died. He dwelt with pride on the success of the business venture and the increase in his family.

"I guess the good people are still trying to save you, Hinkle?"

Sh!—sh!—" hissed Hinkle, as if in alarm. "I ain't a inferdel no more. I've done been converted an' saved."

"I'd hardly have believed it."

"Well, I'll tell you. It happened this way. Tommy died—you remember Tommy—the brightest little feller that was ever born of a woman. It always happens that way. Well, Nancy couldn't seem to git over it. An' folks tol' her the only chanet she had of seein' him agin was to be baptized an' jine the church. She'd 'a' done anything to see Tommy agin, so, knowin' it wouldn't do her no harm, an' might

ease her min', I tol' her to go an' do it, an' she did. Then, when I went to storekeepin' I soon foun' it wouldn't hurt my bizness any to be religus. So, one protracted meetin' I perfessed—an' I'm now a deacon in the church an' pass the hat for the collections. This is a powerful religus community——"

"Did you find it difficult to make a choice of churches?"

"No; not yere. You see, the Baptist air powerful strong, an' have it all their way, so when Parson Chase preached onct saved always saved, I liked that an' jined him. I didn't care to be put to the trouble of doin' it over agin every protracted meetin'. You see, I'm on the safe side if there's nothin' in it, an', as I said, it don't hurt my bizness."

Marvin thought he detected a queer, sly twinkle in the other's eyes, but it might have been a trick of the moonlight. But the backsliding of his friend caused him a keen disappointment. He had often thought of him as a rare character, with a courage and honesty that would hold him true to his convictions.

The next day as Hinkle was showing him through the store, Marvin sat down on the counter facing the open back door. He no longer heeded the words of his talkative host, as his eyes drifted over the stretches of fields and woods. In his mind he re-enacted other scenes that had transpired here. The past came to him as a dream. He found it difficult to

identify himself with that other personality who had sat here and looked into the radiant face, listened to the gentle, wistful voice, of his father. Yet all the years life had gone on her quietly, inevitably, relentlessly. The thought filled him with a vague disquiet. Life, after all, was an accident—the toss of a coin. Here or there—heads or tail—a span—and then—it didn't matter.

There was a heavy tread on the porch, and a huge form darkened the doorway.

"Hello, Hinkle. Goin' to have another swinger," the speaker roared with forceful cheerfulness, mopping his brow.

"Why, good mornin', Squire."

Marvin turned and looked at the newcomer. Then he sprang from the counter and grasped his hand heartily.

"Will Oliver, I'm glad to see you."

Oliver stood staring, for the once struck dumb. He failed to recognize the stranger, but it was painfully evident that he did not wish to confess it.

"I'm shore powerful glad to see you," he said, holding Marvin's hand in a vise-like grip. "Jest wait a minit—I know you—would 'a' knowed you in Africa. I can't jest git the name—wait a minit——"

"Well, you ought to git it—you'r talkin' 'im up often enough," said Hinkle.

"Jest wait a minit—of course I know' im—know 'im as well as I know myself—why, it's—it's right on the end of my tongue——"

"It's Parson Garner—you'd never guess 'im with the beard on."

Oliver blinked and gasped and stared dumb-founded.

"Holy Moses, if I don't believe it is, shore's I'm alive. Where in the world did you drop from?"

He presently led Marvin across the street to the shade of a lone live-oak for a confidential "confab."

Oliver had remained on his little farm all the years, but latterly had managed to have himself elected Justice of the Peace. He was serving his second term and, elated with his growing popularity, was aspiring to become County Judge.

"You still find time to preach, Will?"

"Well, I tell you, I ain't preachin' no more. I kinder lost faith in religion after the way they treated you at Harris; then I got into politicks, an' a feller don't want to be too religus when he gits mixed up in them. Then the Methodist was gittin' pretty weak 'bout yere, an' the Baptist—well, they 'bout run things—an' I give up my license an' quit. I 'tend the barbecues, picnics an' protracted meetin's an' jest talk an' mix with the people. If it's a Baptist, I'm a Baptist; if it's a Campbellite, why I'm a Campbellite; an' if it's a Methodist, why, I'm a Methodist.

Don't know as it makes any difference, nohow, an' I'm takin' Paul's advice—all things to all men to win a few—an' it works. Yes; I know the lick, an' if yers truly ain't 'lected County Jedge, there'll be a tic. You ought to 'tend a Fourth of July an' hear me speak—I can whoop up the boys to beat the band——”

“So you are not burying your talent, after all?”

Oliver was silent for a minute, then he looked up sheepishly.

“Parson, you ain't goin' to hol' that agin me?” he said.

The little unkept graveyard slept peacefully on the hillside. The whitewashed pailings that enclosed it glared white against the masses of green within; the grey headstones, time-stained, were mottled with the shadows of slow-moving boughs. Deep in the tangle of grass and creepers, rose and honeysuckle clambered in wild abandon, breathing an incense upon the air, as if from an unseen altar.

Marvin and his wife, knee-deep in the bracken, stood with bowed heads before a shaft of grey granite. They read the simple inscription on its base: “Father and Mother.” When at last Marvin looked up he was alone. Then he knelt at the grave, the rank grass closing above him caressingly. His soul trembled in the fulness of memory. He seemed to sense the pres-

sence of the dead, feel again the potency of their influence.

“Mother, mother!” burst from his lips.

Man may go far, and he may find all-encompassing love, but never will he find love like the love of a mother.

He lifted his eyes to the unfathomable sunlit spaces, searched the unanswering depths—the God who once spake there spake no more. He realized how far he had travelled—so far there was no return. A vague uneasiness seized upon his soul, mastered him.

“Mildred, Mildred!” he cried fearfully.

An arm stole gently about his neck. For a long time they sat in silence looking down the valley, into the sky. Then he drew her lips to his, looked deep into her eyes.

“Honey, I feel I ought to preach——”

“You do; your pictures are sermons.”

“It seems to me the world still gropes in the shadow of God—I’d lead it into His sunlight.”

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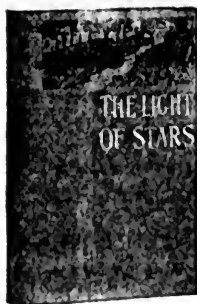
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